

Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: “W.E.B Du Bois and the Moral Dimensions of US American Democracy.”

Author: José-Antonio Orosco

Readability: Easy/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis:

W.E.B. Du Bois argues that African Americans have made a unique moral contribution to U.S. democracy: they “collectively possess a utopian vision that can press the United States forward to become a richer society than what the Founding Fathers envisioned” (2).

- “Du Bois believes that the unique cultural contribution of African Americans consists of a particular understanding, arrived at through their centuries of experience with subordination and marginalization in white supremacist society, about the nature of power and democratic governance in the United States that has the potential to radically shift the direction of American society” (3).

Key Definitions:

- Race (biological essentialism view) = race is a biological category that distinguishes between groups of human beings, where essential qualities delineate one supposed race from another (4)
- Race (familial-historical view) = a group united not so much by phenotype, but by a common historical origin in a particular social/political/historical context (6)
- Ideals of life = unique views of how to live/unique conception of the good life?
- Double consciousness = knowledge gained from having to navigate and shuttle between two social spheres, with different norms and institutions, and that relate to one another through an unequal power relationship (12).

Brief Summary:

1. Begins with the question: what does it mean to make a racial contribution to democracy? (2)
 - a. Stepping back: what is a race?
 - i. Du Bois rejects the “the view that race is a biological category that distinguishes between groups of human beings. He finds no essential qualities that serve to delineate one supposed race from another” (4)
 - ii. But this does not lead him to be an eliminativist about race: he still thinks race plays an important pragmatic role if it is understood as a “historical or sociological category” (5)
 1. He thinks race is an important tool for helping people make sense of their own experiences (8)

2. The concept of race can help particular racial groups develop their own unique “particular cultural ‘ideals of life’ with one another and in dialogue with other groups” (10)
2. Du Bois thought that African Americans’ history of subordination and oppression, and having to navigate between two social spheres – their own and that of the dominant white society -- allows them to have a double consciousness or “second sight,” where “They see the tensions, contradictions, and missed possibilities of the US American democratic way of life in a way not immediately apparent to other citizens whose lives are eased by white privilege” (12)
3. This allows them to make moral contributions *qua* African Americans to U.S. democracy:
 - a. The need to respect **human beings as such** (12-13):
 - i. Evidenced by their advocacy during Reconstruction and other eras of social programs that benefitted multiple marginalized groups, like poor whites and people with disabilities (13)
 - ii. “the positive developments in US American democracy owed their origins not to the wisdom of the Founders unfolding through history, but, in large part, to Blacks consciously fighting for recognition of their humanity against ideals and institutions built by the Founders, and their powerful heirs: “The motive force of democracy has nearly always been the push from below rather than the aristocratic pull from above” (13).
 - b. The importance of “deep democratic rule”:
 - i. “White supremacists held that extending the circle of democratic rulers too widely threatens to create coordination problems among social interests that could bring about significant social instability. Instead of widespread democracy, some groups of individuals--namely rich, white, men-- ought to rule benevolently for the benefit of others, such as the poor, Blacks, or women” (14)
 - ii. This view is flawed because “laws then become commands that are imposed upon the majority of people by the elites, embodying their limited social understandings and priorities, rather than regulations that help to coordinate and respond to the broader needs and interests of people. This situation is the one that eventually breeds resentment, resistance, and social instability” (14-15)
4. Conclusion: “African Americans, according to Du Bois’s account, have come forward as a historical community that maintains a commitment to certain moral principles that have altered the nature of democratic institutions and practice in the United States. More importantly, this perspective is a future oriented one that portends the development of a much **more participatory and deliberative democracy** as being the one consistent with the **moral principle of respect for the individual as human being**” (17). [emphasis mine]

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Possible Applications:

1. Use as an entry in **Epistemology** class for **Standpoint Epistemology**; (suggestion to pair with Patricia Hill Collins for this).
2. In **Philosophy of Race** or **Metaphysics** or **Bioethics**, in order to explore what’s the point of a concept like race? Some helpful complementary texts include Sally Haslanger, Charles Mills, Dorothy Roberts, and Iris Marion Young.
3. In **Social and Political Philosophy**, use with Young’s “From Guilt to Solidarity” to draw out the need to include ‘victims’ in discussions of responsibility to ending injustice.

Complementary Texts/Resources:

On race/epistemology:

- Charles Mills, “Does Race Exist?” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epAv6Q6da_o
- Sally Haslanger, “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” *Noûs* 34 (1):31–55 (2000)
- Linda Martín Alcoff, “Sotomayor’s Reasoning.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (March 2010): pp. 122-138, available at <http://www.alcoff.com/content/palin.html>
- Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)
- Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005);
- [Dorothy Roberts “Debating the Cause of Health Disparities” In *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 21.3 \(2012\): 332-41.](#)
- Iris Marion Young, “Lived Body vs Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity,” *Ratio* 15 (4):410–428 (2002).
- Collins, Patricia, 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, New York: Routledge.

On (participatory) democracy:

- Aristotle, *The Politics*.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*.

- Alexis de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*

By Du Bois, (texts which Orosco mentions):

- W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art”. In *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*. Edited by David Levering Lewis. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995).
- W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races”. In *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*. Edited by David Levering Lewis. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995)
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1940),
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999 [1920])
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*, (Boston: Stratford, 1924)

By the ‘Founding Fathers’:

- *The Federalist Papers*
- *Hamilton* (the musical)

Possible Class Activities:

Extending the ideas: Since there is lots of material in here that is a bit quick, it could be useful/interesting to use this as a platform to get into some of the bigger ideas before having more fully worked out views laid out for the students (likely in later readings).

Some areas to dive into include: (1) what ‘race’ really is? (2) What essentialism about race consists in? (3) What democracy requires? (4) What ‘The Founders’ had in mind? (5) Why governments tend to go wrong (to contrast with Aristotle’s analysis).

Could **problematize** the piece (and its essentialism) by pairing it with pieces by Linda Alcoff or Tommie Shelby or others.

What traditional texts might this text replace?

This is a bit more difficult since the piece works best as an introduction to a variety of ideas, but some possibilities that were suggested include:

- John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, and specifically his thoughts on the ‘marketplace of ideas.’
- Something about moral progress, (Trip suggests “The Declaration of Sentiments,” though this is not exactly traditional, as is perhaps a better complimentary piece).

- Possibly Rawls, and the Veil of Ignorance