

REPRISE: W. E. B. DU BOIS'S
"THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PEOPLE" (1904)

Introduction to "The Development of a People"

Robert Gooding-Williams and Chike Jeffers

In the April 1904 issue of this journal, then called the *International Journal of Ethics*, the African American scholar and activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, published an article entitled "The Development of a People." We are honored and delighted to provide a short introduction to the reprinting of Du Bois's essay in the current, April 2013, issue of *Ethics*, for the essay is not now as well known as some of his other philosophical writings (such as, for example, "The Conservation of Races" [1897], the focus of Chike Jeffers's contribution to this issue). "Development" demonstrates the continuing force of Du Bois's arguments and insights, reminding us why many contemporary philosophers still take his thought so seriously.

Du Bois opens "Development" by reflecting on the relationship between knowledge and social progress in "a world which is daily becoming physically smaller" (525/292). By the essay's end, he has turned from a global perspective and a concern with theoretical foundations to an eminently practical proposal that is also decidedly local, arguing in particular that institutions like Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta), where he taught, have a critical role to play in promoting African American progress. Along the way, as the reader proceeds from Du Bois's initial ruminations to his closing exhortation, she is treated to a wealth of compelling prose, qualitative and quantitative sociological observations, a vivid and wide-ranging historical narrative, and sophisticated theorizing about culture, economics, and moral responsibility.

Although the essay dates from the era of Jim Crow and expressly engages the racial dynamics of that period, "Development" remains surprisingly pertinent today, not only to ongoing debates about the demands

of racial justice but also to current work in ethics and social and political philosophy that bears on those debates. How ought we to discern and measure the socioeconomic advancement of African Americans? What are the causes of dysfunctional behavior (what Du Bois calls “degradation”) in black communities? What are the most appropriate mechanisms for combating racial disadvantage? Du Bois stresses and addresses these three questions in “Development,” but so too does Elizabeth Anderson in her widely praised book, *The Imperative of Integration* (2010).¹ And while Du Bois and Anderson notably underline different strategies in answering the question as to the proper mechanism for combating racial disadvantage (for Du Bois, moral uplift through group leadership, for Anderson, integration through affirmative action and other policy initiatives), both write as nonideal theorists who methodologically combine normative argument and empirical inquiry in assessing social problems. Of course, what is most striking about the connection to Anderson’s book is the continued relevance of the questions motivating Du Bois.

Significantly, both empirical and normative considerations shape Du Bois’s treatment of the idea of development. With regard to the former, he is at great pains to show that the slave trade and the institution of slavery suffice to explain the “degradation” of black life. Presciently anticipating Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and Manning Marable’s *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983), he argues that if Africans and African Americans count as degraded when judged by widely endorsed criteria of modern, civilized development, it is because exploitative, immoral economic practices have historically ravaged and effectively “underdeveloped” them—not because they embody a biologically based racial inferiority.² Regarding the latter, Du Bois very well knows that developmental thinking was intricately entangled with scientific racism through much of the nineteenth century. Still, he wishes to salvage the idea of development, to dissociate it from doctrines asserting that blacks are inherently inferior to whites, and so to preserve it as a point of reference for evaluating African American progress in meeting the normative demands of modern society and culture. While sensitive to the history of racialized developmental thinking that Ladelle McWhorter recounts in her *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* (2009), his considered commitment to the idea of development has striking affinities to the “recon-

1. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

2. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972); Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

structivist" position that Thomas McCarthy outlines in his *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (2009).³

Du Bois's engagement with the idea of "development" can also be brought into conversation with recent explorations of the nature of moral progress in works like Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Honor Code* (2010) and Philip Kitcher's *The Ethical Project* (2011).⁴ It should be noted that transatlantic slavery, the centerpiece of Du Bois's story of moral degradation, is a major theme in Appiah and Kitcher's books—indeed, both writers regard the abolition of the slave trade and slavery as one of the most useful case studies in positive moral change. The pressing moral question that Du Bois goes on to raise, however, is what responsibility a nation like the United States has to redress the major gap in standards and styles of living produced by the experience of slavery and how ought that redress be provided.

Another topic that Appiah and Kitcher discuss is sexual morality (Appiah in his discussion of honor killings, Kitcher in his discussion of ethical progress regarding the treatment of homosexuality). Sexual morality emerges as a central theme in "Development," and in a way that will both surprise many and appear to be painfully out of step with the present. Could Du Bois honestly believe that an assault on traditional sexual morality was at the heart of the lasting wrong of slavery? What are we to make of the claim that "the patriarchal clan-life of the Africans, with its polygamy protected by custom, tradition and legal penalty, was infinitely superior to the shameless promiscuity of the West Indian plantations, the unhallowed concubinage of Virginia, or the prostitution of Louisiana" (537–38/304–5)? It would seem clear that our first complaint should be about Du Bois's failure here to emphasize that patriarchy is wrong (and not merely "barbarous" in the Eurocentric but not-so-insulting sense that Du Bois applies the term; 537/304). In making this necessary point, however, would we be evading the question of whether Du Bois's comparative judgment is correct? Debate about the effects of slavery on black sexual norms is not new, but few contemporary philosophers have tackled the subject.

A final issue we would like to raise concerns the relationship between the argument of "Development" and Chike Jeffers's discussion of "The Conservation of Races" in his contribution to this issue of *Ethics*. It is not implausible to read "Development" as making the following claims: (1) the

3. Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

4. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: Norton, 2010); Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

slave trade and the institution of slavery destroyed African Americans' ties to their African origins; (2) as bad as it was for African Americans to have suffered this break with their origins, they have no reason to expend energy trying to mend it; and (3) the proper goal of the educated black elite is to help the masses of black Americans assimilate to the norms of modern, Euro-American civilization. Notice, however, that if this reading is correct, then it would seem to have issued from a Du Bois very different than the one Jeffers describes, according to whom assimilation is precisely what black Americans should resist. Pressing the tension between "Conservation" and "Development" even further, we also note that the former essay argues, contrary to (1), that African Americans enjoy a genuine connection to their "African fatherland" and, contrary to (2), that they should regard themselves as connected to their fatherland not only by heritage but by an ongoing mission to take their "just place" as the leaders of "Pan-Negroism."⁵

It would be a mistake, we think, to regard the tension between the arguments animating these essays as a contradiction to which Du Bois was oblivious. Quite to the contrary, there is a case to be made that, even before publishing "Development," Du Bois had already devoted much of his most famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), to showing that the contradiction is merely apparent—specifically, by characterizing fit and legitimate black political leaders as aspiring both to uplift the backward black masses (to assimilate them to modern norms) and to heed the collective ethos of an African American folk culture whose sorrow songs stem from black African origins.⁶ In his book *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (2009), in fact, Robert Gooding-Williams makes this case, arguing that Du Bois envisions black political leaders as agents of uplift who should attempt through their actions to express the collective, spiritual identity of the black folk.⁷ Whether *Souls* succeeds in resolving the tension between Du Bois's assimilationist and anti-assimilationist tendencies, we leave as an open question.

5. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44, 43.

6. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).

7. Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

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