
W.E.B. Du Bois and “Double Consciousness”

GENTRAIN 13: The End of Innocence

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W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)

- Born William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, in Great Barrington, MA
 - Completed his university work at the University of Berlin and Harvard University, where he was the first black man to receive a doctorate.
 - Became one of the co-founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
 - Wrote against segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, and employment discrimination.
 - Wrote:
 - .*The Souls of Black Folks* (1903)
 - .*Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)
 - He emigrated to Ghana around 1960 and became a naturalized citizen there, but was critical of Marcus Garvey's Back-to-Africa Movement
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“Of Our Spiritual Strivings”

“Between me and the other world there is an unmasked question: unmasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent coloredman in town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” (1729)

“Of Our Spiritual Strivings”

Double-Consciousness

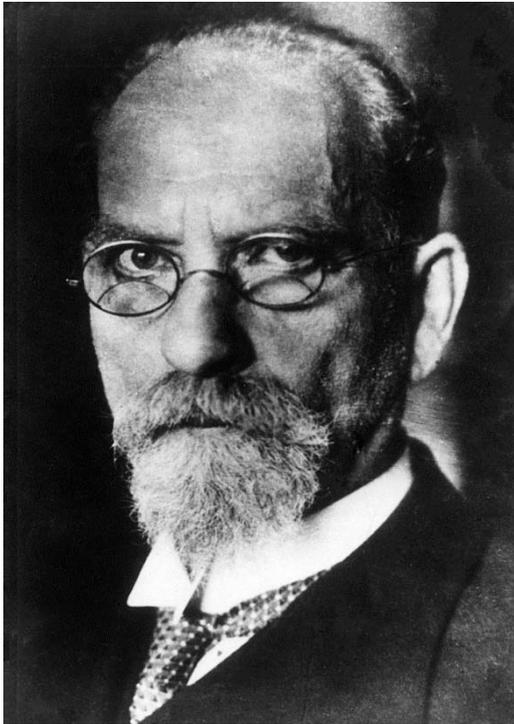
“After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that look on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1730).

“Of Our Spiritual Strivings”

Double-Consciousness

“The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (1730-1731).

The Other



- The Other → first identified in phenomenology (Hegel & Edmund Husserl)
- The basis of intersubjectivity → the differences between the Self and the Other contribute to the self-image of a person
- Other is dissimilar, opposite of the Self, the Us, and the Same
- Otherness: the state of being different and alien to the identity of the Self and the Same
 - Otherness distinct from the symbolic order of things
 - Distinct from social norms → Otherness is non-conformity to the Same
 - Condition of dis-enfranchisement and exclusion
 - Marginalizes the Other from the center of society to its periphery

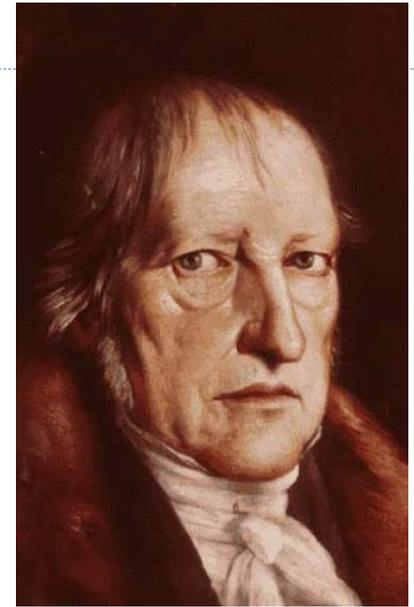
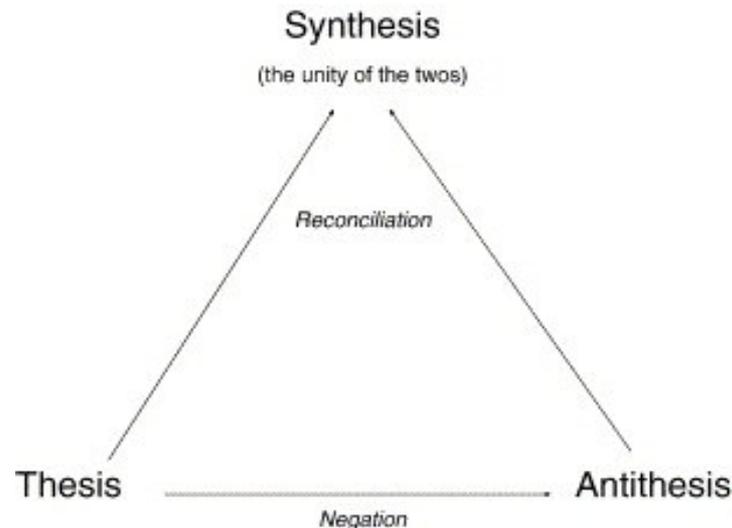


The Other



Du Bois, double consciousness, and Hegel

- Kathleen Higgins (2006): identifies Du Bois as a Hegelian philosopher
- Like Hegel, the Du Boisian self is “torn asunder” and divided
 - That struggle then strives to attain a higher synthesis of identity in a new formation



Second Sight

- Because of double consciousness, black Americans have a **privileged epistemological perspective**
 - Black Americans are able to understand the white world, meanwhile simultaneously perceiving it from a different perspective
 - Two ways of seeing: insider and outside perspective
 - In contrast, white Americans have only a single consciousness and perspective (as member of the dominant culture)
 - White culture has its own racial and cultural norms asserted as absolute and **hegemonic**
 - **Hegemony:** (Antonio Gramsci, Marxist political theory) → the idea that the ruling classes can manipulate the values and social mores of a society → so that the worldview of the ruling classes becomes the worldview of the entire society
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Later Marxism

- Turned to communism later in life → seeking equality
 - *“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” (Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois)*
 - Not mere following of Marx → contributed to communist theoretical traditions
 - Argues that communism has no explicit method or plan to liberate Africans and Black Americans → should redirect focus to this end
 - People of color amount for majority of world’s working classes → ignoring their liberation, communism cannot be achieved.
 - *Black Folk, Then and Now (1939)*: “the dark workers of Asia, Africa, the islands of the sea, and South and Central America...these are the one who are supporting a superstructure of wealth, luxury, and extravagance. It is the rise of these people that is the rise of the world”.
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