

An Unfinished Revolution: Dialogues on Freedom and Democracy

The Souls of White Folk

By W. E. B. Du Bois

High in the tower where I sit beside the loud complaining of the human sea I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that puzzle me more than the Souls of White Folks. Not, mind you, the souls of them that have become painfully conscious of their whiteness; those in whose minds the paleness of their bodily skins is fraught with tremendous and eternal significance.

Forgetting (as I can at times forget) the meaning of this singular obsession to me and my folk, I become the more acutely sensitive to the marvelous part this thought is playing today, and to the way it is developing the Souls of White Folks, and I wonder what the end will be.

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing — a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction. The middle age regarded it with mild curiosity, and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one great Universal Man with fine frenzy which ignored color and race as well as birth. Today we have changed all that, and the world, in sudden emotional conversion, has discovered that it is white, and, by that token, wonderful.

When I seek to explain this to me inexplicable phenomenon, there always creeps first to my mind the analogy of the child and his candy. To every child there comes a time when the toothsome of his sweets is strangely enhanced by the thought that his playmate has none. Further than this, however, the analogy fails, for with one accord the mother world seeks to teach this child the third new joy of sharing. Any thought, however, of sharing their color is to white folks not simply unthinkable, but its mention is liable to lead to violent explosions of anger and vituperation. Not only is there this unrebuked and vociferously applauded greediness, but something that sounds like: "I shall keep my candy and you shall not have yours." Or, in other words, it is not the obvious proposition: "I am white and you are black," but the astonishing declaration, "I am white and you are nothing."

This assumption that of all the hues of God, whiteness alone is candy to the world child — is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan — leads to curious acts: even the sweeter souls of the dominants world, as they discourse with me on weather, weal and woe, are continually playing above their actuals word an obligato of turn and tone saying:

"My poor unwhite thing! Weep not nor rage. I know too well, that the curse of God lies heavy on you. Why? That is not for me to say; but be brave! Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may, one day, be born — white!"

As such times I have an unholy desire to laugh, and to ask with seeming irrelevance and certain irreverence:

“But what on earth is whiteness, that one should so desire it?” Then always somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth, forever and ever, Amen!

Now, what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time. Its first effects are funny; the strut of the Southerner, the arrogance of the Englishman amuck, the whoop of the hoodlum who vicariously leads your mob. Next it appears dampening generous enthusiasm in what we once counted glorious: to free the slave is discovered to be tolerable only in so far as it freed his master. Do we sense somnolent writhings in black Africa, or angry groans in India, or triumphant “Banzais” in Japan? “To your tents, O Israel!” these nations are not white. Build warships and heft the “Big Stick.”

After the more comic manifestations and chilling of generous enthusiasm, come subtler, darker deeds. Everything considered, the title to the universe claimed by White Folk is faulty. It ought at least to look plausible. How easy, then, by emphasis and omission, to make every child believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man’s soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was white man’s thought; that every great deed the world ever did was a white man’s deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man’s dream. In fine, that if from the world were dropped everything that could not fairly be attributed to White Folk the world would, if anything, be even greater, true-er, better than now. And if all this be a lie, is it not a lie in a great cause?

Here it is that the comedy verges to tragedy. The first minor note is struck all unconsciously by those worthy souls in whom consciousness of high descent brings burning desire to spread the gift abroad — the obligation of nobility to the ignoble. Such sense of duty assumes two things: a real possession of the heritage and its frank appreciation by the humble born. So long, then, as humble black folk, voluble with thanks, receive barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction. But when the black man begins to dispute the white man’s title to certain alleged bequests of the Father’s in wage and position, authority and training; and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste — then the spell is suddenly broken and the philanthropist is apt to be ready to believe that negroes are impudent, that the South is right, and that Japan wants to fight us.

After this the descent to Hell is easy. On the pale white faces which the great billows whirl upward to my tower I see again and again, often and still more often, a writing of human hatred. A deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its foundations. Down thru the green waters, on the bottom of the world where men move to and fro, I have seen a man — an educated gentleman — grow livid with anger because a little, silent black woman was sitting by herself in a Pullman car. He was a white man. I have seen a great grown man curse a little child who had wandered into the wrong waiting room searching for its mother: “Here you damned black ----” He was white. In Central Park I have seen the upper lip of a

quiet peaceful man curl back in a tigerish snarl of rage because black folk rode by in a motor car. He was a white man. We have seen, you and I, city after city, drunk and furious with ungovernable lust of blood, mad with murder, destroying, killing and cursing, torturing human victims, because somebody accused of a crime happened to be of the same color as the mob's innocent victims, and because that color was not white.

Up through the foam of green and weltering waters wells this great mass of hatred in wilder, fiercer violence, until I look down and know that today to the millions of my people no misfortune could happen, of death and pestilence, failure and defeat, that would not make the hearts of millions of their fellows beat with fierce vindictive joy. Do you doubt it? Ask your own soul — what would it say if the next census told it that half Black America was dead and the rest dying?

Unfortunate? Unfortunate. But where is the misfortune? Mine? Am I in my blackness the sole sufferer? I suffer. And yet, somehow, above the suffering, above the shackled anger that beats the bars, above the hurt that crazes, surges in me a vast pity — pity for a people prisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a fantasy.

I sit and see the souls of the White Folk daily shriveling and dying in the fierce flame of this new fanaticism. Whither has gone America's proud moral leadership of the world? Where is the generous thought, the sweet applause, the soul's wide freedom with which we once were wont to greet the up-struggling of human kind? How natural it has become that our ambassador to the world, fresh from the laurels of Brownsville, should greet old Egypt's fight of freedom with a blow between the eyes!

Onward we reel. Peace? Ten thousand dollars for peace and two hundred million for war. How can there be peace for those who are white and hate "niggers"? Democracy? Absurd! Dream of infants! Let Disfranchisement and Privilege and a Solid South rule this great republic. The rights of woman? Are not American women the best dressed in the world? Do they not bring the highest titles in the market? Does free America want to enfranchise any more dagoes and hybrids?

It is not alone this pitiful striking of colors in the great world crusade for liberty, equality and brotherhood; it is the humiliating thought in our own souls that this outward surrender is the honest counterpart of the inward degeneration — the deliberate crippling and deforming of the Souls of White Folk by the glorification of Color Caste.

To you this is less immediately apparent than to me; for before me the Souls of White Folk stand singularly naked. In my presence they tend to lay aside all their little lies and hypocrisies and bathe in brutal frankness. Why not? Am I a millionaire? Have I a political pull? Have I social prestige? Have I any brains? I bear the shadowed answer on my face. Well, then, be thrifty. Why waste manners, beauty, courtesy or conversation on me? There's nought to gain and much to lose, for the watchful world is sitting near ready to resent social equality. Therefore, he who seems to you a gentleman is but his boorish self to me; she who is to you a vision of womanly loveliness may be but selfish vulgarity to me. Such nastier aspects of modern American life flash repeatedly both on me and mine, so that I realize

even more vividly than you how thoroughly and persistently we are making these things characteristic of the nation, the measure of its thought and soul, every time you make the measure of a man, whiteness. Why not? There is no logical escape. A true and worthy ideal frees and uplifts a people; a false ideal imprisons and lowers. Say to men, earnestly and repeatedly: "Honesty is best; knowledge is power; do unto others as you be done by." Say this and act it, and the nation must move toward it if not to it. But say to a people: "The one virtue is to be white," and the people rush to the one inevitable conclusion, "Kill the 'nigger'!"

Is not this the record of present America? Is not this its headlong progress? Are we not coming more and more, day by day to making the statement, "I am white," the one fundamental tenet of our practical morality? Only when this basic iron rule is involved is our defense of right nationwide prompt. Murder may swagger, theft may rule and prostitution flourish, and the nation gives but spasmodic, intermittent and lukewarm attention. But let the murderer be black or the thief brown or the violator of womanhood have but a drop of negro blood, and the righteousness of the indignation sweeps the world. Nor would this fact make the indignation less justifiable did not we all know that it was blackness that was condemned, and not crime.

When black Jack Johnson beat a white man at a white man's game before an audience of a hundred millions, with what mingled motive did those millions, from the United Society of Christian Endeavor to the hoodlums of the nation, join hands to shout "Shame!"

Then it was, too, that a little girl in New York made a sudden discovery. She was a poor little waif of six or seven years, and she learned that she was white, and that the fact denoted unusual desert and virtue. She was stealing a ride on an Eighth Avenue furniture van and spied me on a passing streetcar. She stuck out her tongue and jeered and made every contortion of countenance to show her personal disapproval of my kind and the superiority of hers.

Poor little thrall'd thing! It was not enough that she should be prisoner by poverty and ignorance; this great nation must needs chain her with race prejudice — must tell her that always White is Right.

Beneath all that was laughable in that absurd little figure I seemed to see the woe of the world in the education of the American child today. What tenet of our morality are we teaching today so freely, plainly and persistently! I fear the atrophy of soul which this teaching must bring. Both mentally and morally white folk today are suffering from this attempt to transmute a physical accident into a moral deed — to draw unreal distinctions among human souls.

Mentally the blight has fallen on American science. The race problem is not insoluble if the correct answer is sought. It is insoluble if the wrong answer is insisted upon, as it has been insisted upon for thrice a hundred years. A very moderate brain can show that two and two is four. But no human ingenuity can make that sum three or five. This American science has long attempted to do. It has made itself the handmaid of a miserable prejudice.

In its attempt to justify the treatment of black folk it has repeatedly suppressed evidence, misquoted authority, distorted fact and deliberately lied. It is wonderful that in the very lines of social study where America should shine it has done nothing.

Worse than this is our moral and religious plight. We profess a religion of high ethical advancement, a spiritual faith of respect for truth, despising of personal riches, a reverence for humility, and not simply justice to our fellows, but personal sacrifice of our good for theirs. It is a high aim. So high that we ought not utterly to be condemned for not reaching it, so long as we strive bravely toward it. Do we, as a people? On the contrary, we have injected into our creed a gospel of human hatred and prejudice, a despising of our less fortunate fellows, not to speak of our reverence for wealth, which flatly contradicts the Christian ideal. Granting all that American Christianity has done to educate and uplift black men, it must be frankly admitted that there is absolutely no logical method by which the treatment of black folk by white folk in this land can be squared with any reasonable statement or practice of the Christian ideal.

What is the result? It is either the abandonment of the Christian ideal or hypocrisy. Some frankly abandon Christianity when it comes to the race problem and say: Religion does not enter here. They then retire to some more primitive paganism and live there, enlightened by such prejudices as they adopt or inherit. This is retrogression toward barbarism, but it is at least honest. It is infinitely better than its widely accepted alternative, which attempts to reconcile Color Caste and Christianity, and sees or affects to see no incongruity. What ails the religion of a land when its strongholds of orthodoxy are to be found in those regions where race prejudice is most uncompromising, vindictive and cruel? Where human brotherhood is a lie?

The one great moral issue of America upon which the Church of Christ comes nearest being dumb is the question as to the application of the golden rule between White and Black Folk.

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All this I see and hear up in my tower above the thunder of the seven seas. From my narrowed windows I stare into the night that looms beneath the cloud-swept stars. Eastward and westward storms are brewing — great ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty. I will not believe them inevitable. I will not believe that all that was must be — that all the shameful drama of the past must be done again today before the sunlight sweeps the silver seas.

If I cry amid this road of elemental forces, must my cry be vain because it is but a cry — a small and human cry amid Promethean gloom?

Back beyond the world and swept by these wild white faces of the awful dead, why will this Soul of the White Folk, this modern Prometheus, hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past? I hear his mighty cry reverberating thru the world, "I am white!" Well and good. O Prometheus, divine thief! The world is wide enough for two colors, two little shinings of the sun; why then devour your own vitals when I answer, "I am black"?