

## **Tracking Failures, Imagining Alternatives: Du Bois and the Myth of Guaranteed Progress**

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Much of what surrounds contemporary controversies along the color line—the central problem of the twentieth century according to W.E.B. Du Bois—in the popular rhetoric and imaginary is the inexplicability of the problem’s resurgence today after over 50 years of Civil Rights “victories” and demonstrative “social progress.” There is a cultural narrative of inevitable, collective betterment that appears an inevitable result of the wider acknowledgement and recognition of difference within the culture at large. In this light, our contemporary moment—with its rise in white supremacist violence, xenophobic rhetoric, and entrenched, facile identitarianism—has the illusion of rupture rather than the spirit of continuity. The academy’s promise of liberal education in the face of a “crisis of the humanities” also offers up this narrative of progress as programmatic. On this view, dismissing the power of the liberal arts means undermining an accounting of our guaranteed progress as a society. After all, without the spaces to study and analyze the past, how can we track how far we have come in the present? I turn to this practice within the humanities to think about what such assumptions conceal. What promises of new worlds or future liberations are obscured when we take progress as a given? Counter to the an account of ongoing betterment, perhaps a new way forward in the face of present tensions is the tracking of all the failures of human striving that have created the present moment. While this shift may not be popular—or labeled as unduly pessimistic—it is not an unprecedented shift in perspective. Both within and without the academy, the thoughts of W.E.B. Du Bois prove fruitful in combatting the myth of guaranteed progress, or the promise of social evolutionary advancement through understanding alone.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief analysis, I argue that one of the most important legacies left to us by Du Bois is his practice of shifting the litmus of understanding from a reliance on a progressive guarantee to the necessity of ongoing struggle. Through this new frame, an analysis of power and the recognition of our responsibilities towards others beyond the given horizons of conceptual possibility are

illuminated by explicitly acknowledging and analyzing our moments of failure. In this way, Du Bois insisted that a liberal education must contribute towards developing the toolkit of participation and praxis to maintain and advance the work of justice.

Du Bois's work presents us with a powerful interdisciplinary vision. This interdisciplinarity also offers creative and fruitful engagements that highlight the responsibility of critically re-examining one's thoughts over a lifetime of work. The development of Du Bois's corpus tracks a shift from Victorian moralism and "Talented Tenth" rhetoric to joining the Communist Party and exploring Pan-Africanism as a movement. I want to think through this ideological shift as a mark of this critical responsibility on the part of Du Bois. In particular, this trajectory indicates a willingness to encounter head on where the myth of progress fails. Du Bois realized the necessity of ongoing critical engagement through scholarship and activism, which lead to the vital recognition that inherently progressive narratives of liberal education are false. As George Ciccariello-Maher elaborates, the research of Du Bois "rediscovered something else in the process: a tragic dialectic of reversals, defeats, and missed opportunities; not a long but heroic march toward a brilliant future but 'a brief moment in the sun' before retreating, under the weight of white supremacist terror, 'back again toward slavery'; the ostensible built-in progress of the dialectic of history folded back onto itself, beaten and bloodied" (156–157). In this spirit of rediscovery, I turn to the texts of *John Brown*, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, and *Black Reconstruction* to analyze how Du Bois uses the tools of moral imperative, immanent critique, and historical materialism to demonstrate instances of failed progress and promise, providing ample evidence where the promise of progress "fell back on itself," re-instantiating familiar forms of violence. Reframing the analysis in terms of marking failures as opposed to tracking progress expands the horizon of the possible for Du Bois towards new ways forward. New possibilities of relation with one another emerge as alternatives once we have properly understood our history beyond imposed narrative assumptions of progress.

Du Bois's analysis of the life and actions of John Brown, written in 1909, provides a powerful analysis of failure. The raid on Harper's Ferry and attempted insurrection to end slavery in 1859 was a failure in its own standing, and yet was a powerful catalyst towards new liberatory futures beyond the limits of the law. There was a moral power and force to John Brown's character that recognized the urgency of the moment and the necessity of breaking the law to achieve a greater end—that of liberty and justice for all:

No casuistry of culture or of learning, of well-being or tradition moved him in the slightest degree: "Slavery is wrong," he said,— "kill it." Destroy it—uproot it, stem, blossom, and branch; give it no quarter, exterminate it and do it now. Was he wrong? No. The forcible staying of human uplift by barriers of law, and might, and tradition is the most wicked thing on earth. It is wrong, eternally wrong. It is wrong by whatever name it is called, on in whatever guise it lurks, and whenever it appears. But it is especially heinous, black, and cruel when it masquerades in the robes of the law and justice and patriotism. So was American slavery clothed in 1859, and it had to die by revolution, not by milder means. And this men knew. They had known it a hundred years. Yet they shrank and trembled. (*John Brown* 340–341)

The mere knowledge that something is corrupt is not enough to encourage action. Here, Du Bois points to the importance of tracking the moral failures of the broader society in response to injustice as a pattern of awareness. The essential status of an eternal moral wrong can go unacknowledged in a moral universe that only considers individual practices as relevant for judgment and consideration. The unique moral fortitude and conviction of individuals taken against an expansive institution raises new questions of morality for Du Bois. The burden of failure does not fall on the actions of John Brown as a morally upstanding individual striving for a liberatory future for all. Rather, the burden of failure falls on a society that does not foster or encourage such higher actions. The moral imperative for right action is then no longer a problem of individual resilience. It is expanded into a political question. Society fails when the tools and actions to take on essential moral concerns are put aside for the sake of stability.

The investigation of John Brown as a whole person beyond the singular effort of Harper's Ferry opens a vital space to critique the locus of moral imperatives. By fleshing out the fullness of an individual, Du Bois paradoxically provides an opportunity to theorize against the individualistic limits of the social imaginary. Instead of honing in on the solitary exemplar of the man, Du Bois utilizes Brown's full biography to flesh out the broader stakes of a new moral practice that would facilitate further revolutionary—and necessary—right action: "Freedom has come to mean not individual caprice or aberration, but social self-realization in an endless chain of selves; and

freedom for such development is not the denial but the central assertion of evolutionary theory” (*John Brown* 379). In other words, it is a collective striving and group relation that becomes the marker of moral right action or failure for Du Bois far more than the individuated exception. As Du Bois demonstrates through the biographical investigation of Brown, he worked *with* Black folk and not merely *for* them. John Brown chose an alternative mode of daily practice beyond the singular, focal action of Harper’s Ferry. What does this documentation then reveal about the social failures of American life? The moral imperative reaches beyond the Kantian rational subject to become a communal effort with an anchored history and immediate demand in the present political moment. Society thus needs a broader moral imperative beyond the reduction of morality to the question of singular persons and their behaviors.

I would like to pause here on the call that Du Bois makes to the popular language of his day. The turn to “evolutionary theory” to bolster this new vision of an intersubjective, socially minded morality attempts to enter into the discourse of difference at the turn of the twentieth century beyond the popular model of eugenics, yet still comprehensive within a Social Darwinist framework. He goes further:

This, then, is the truth: the cost of liberty is less than the price of repression, even though the cost be blood. Freedom of development and equality of opportunity is the demand of Darwinism and this calls for the abolition of hard and fast lines between races, just as it called for the breaking down of barriers between classes. Only in this way can the best in humanity be discovered and conserved, and only thus can mankind live in peace and progress. (*John Brown* 395)

There is a turn to the guaranteed myth of evolutionary progress to support his arguments for racial equality at this time. This turn toward the lexicon of inclusion into a mainstream discourse is an attempt to fit into a wider ideological framework. While the critique of individualism stands in its own right, there is still an attempt to include this counter-narrative into a larger mainstream discourse. This intellectual move presents itself as a shift towards a diversifying framework of Social Darwinism to get around overtly racist eugenics. If Du Bois can make his argument in the language of those who monopolize the discourse towards a shared end, then perhaps the critique

will be taken up across the field, and striving for racial equality may become a reality. However, this turn as a tactic did not have the power that he intended.

Through further engagement and scholarship, Du Bois realized that utilizing the language of the powerful that performs exclusion and monopolizes discourse is itself a failure—it cannot be co-opted for the effective work of betterment across difference. In *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, Du Bois critiques the strategy of incorporation that he once utilized in his own theory. He does this by turning to immanent critique. This methodological pivot from moralism grants deeper arguments to support the claim that it is no longer the responsibility of those “within the veil” to strive to meet an impossible standard. Rather, the exclusion of non-white voices is a structural failure within the very terms of discourse: “Instead of standing as a great example of the success of democracy and the possibility of human brotherhood America has taken her place as an awful example of its pitfalls and failures, so far as black and brown and yellow peoples are concerned [...] America, Land of Democracy, wanted to believe in the failure of democracy so far as darker people were concerned” (*Darkwater* 28). Reasoning one’s way into inclusion or recognition by the means set forth by the dominant discourse is now understood as a logical impossibility. The hegemonic modes of discourse fail by their own standards. By marking the failure of inclusion as an intentional practice, Du Bois shifted his own practice of writing and thinking. He no longer embraced the language of the current moment for the sake of incorporation, but turned to the practice of immanent critique to make explicit the mechanisms that kept fast the color line. This methodological turn provides deeper explication into the points where inclusion and incorporation fail. The burden of failure has a different locus of responsibility—that of the systemic structures of white supremacy. Therefore, any attempt at striving for recognition or inclusion in existing terms is already a failed project.

Du Bois further articulates this turn towards immanent critique in his 1932 speech “Education and Work”:

Let there be no misunderstanding about this, no easy-going optimism. We are not going to share modern civilization just by deserving recognition. We are going to force ourselves in by organized far-seeking effort—by out-thinking and out-flanking the owner of the world today who are too drunk with their own arrogance and power successfully to oppose us if we think and learn and do. (71)

It is no longer a failure of being understood by the oppressor that continues exclusion. Rather, these failures of incorporation and integration point towards a systemic mode of exclusion. Recognizing this structure opens up for Du Bois—and for us in our own strivings—a different horizon for imagining a future beyond the set terms of guaranteed progress. By tracking the explicit modes of failure within the claim to progress, immanent critique of existing hegemony without a desire to succumb to its terms opens new modes of analysis.

Although such practices continue to be of great import in combatting the myth of guaranteed progress, the role of immanent critique was not sufficient in capturing the extent of structural failures that left Black and Brown bodies in the wake of white supremacy. In his *magnum opus* of research, Du Bois investigated the complex material conditions and political forces behind the failures of post-Civil War racial equality in *Black Reconstruction*. Published in 1935, this text solidifies the importance of historical materialism as a mode of critiquing failure for Du Bois. Specifically, it is through investigating what actually happened on the ground with an eye to economic factors in the transition from an agrarian to industrial mode of production that the reasons for this failure of racial equality become apparent. Du Bois reminds us that slavery was an economic system that consolidated power in the hands of a few. He insists that this drive for surplus labor does not vanish after the Civil War:

It must be remembered and never forgotten that the civil war in the South which overthrew Reconstruction was a determined effort to reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation. The wage of the Negro worker, despite the war amendments, was to be reduced to the level of bare subsistence by taxation, peonage, caste, and every method of discrimination. This program had to be carried out in open defiance of the clear letter of the law. (*Black Reconstruction* 670)

The law here comes under scrutiny as a doctrine that requires force of action. It cannot be seen as an ensconced object that always fulfills its promise without further labor. Beyond the failure of the economic sustainment, the perspective of liberalism within the Reconstruction era holds a further difficulty for Du Bois. The declaration of Emancipation is insufficient in itself to improve the

situation of the Black worker. Such realizations are central to the turn to historical materialism. Karl Marx himself made such an observation in the failure of another drive towards progress: “As ever, weakness had taken refuge in a belief in miracles, had fancied the enemy overcome when he was only conjured away in imagination, and lost all understanding of the present in a passive glorification of the future that was in store for it and of the deeds it had *in petto*, but merely did not want to carry out as yet” (598). Taking up this thread, Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* holds the promises of the post-Civil War progress up against the archive of material conditions for Black folks in the aftermath of slavery as an institution. Liberalism, often understood as a space of guaranteed progress, manifests as this space *in petto* for the newly emancipated. The aspirations of the Reconstruction era were seen as un-manifested guarantees rather than a relation that required maintenance, adjustment, and responsibility to shifting historical material conditions.

Du Bois’s shift to historical materialism illuminates the failures of thinking of Reconstruction as a mere ideological leap forward. His research demonstrates that what was clearly needed in the moment after the Civil War was an economic shift in access, organization, and power in regards to land as well as the means of production. The failure of Reconstruction, then, falls on the fundamental misunderstanding of how power functions: “What liberalism did not understand was that such a revolution was economic and involved force. Those who against the public weal have power cannot be expected to yield save to superior power” (*Black Reconstruction* 519–522). The newfound power of liberated Black workers was short-lived because the superior powers over land, resources, and livelihood went unchallenged in any fundamental way after the Civil War. Without that dismantling of the racialized power dynamics for the service of industry in the North as well as the South, the effort to truly recognize Black citizens as equals had no independent force. Such a promise was unsustainable without the force of changed material conditions. The rhetoric and promise of emancipatory futures without recognizing the material conditions of the moment marked Reconstruction for inevitable failure.

Du Bois does not despair this moment, however. There were upshots in participation through governance, education, and public works that left a legacy of Black Reconstruction that could not be denied even in the face of defeat:

The attempt to make black men American citizens was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure. It did not fail where it was expected to fail. It was

Athanasius *contra mundum*, with back to the wall, outnumbered ten to one, with all the wealth and all the opportunity, and all the world against him. And only in his hands and heart the consciousness of a great and just cause; fighting the battle of all the oppressed and despised humanity of every race and color, against the massed hirelings of Religion, Science, Education, Law, and brute force. (*Black Reconstruction* 708)

There is a history of resistance, imagination, participation, and institutional legacies left behind by this moment that prove a fruitful archive for future struggles. The public school system across the South, first Black senators, governors, congress-people, and the recognition of great strength and resistance of the Black workers was pivotal to the victory of the Civil War are but a few powerful legacies of striving that offer strategies and primes against our current adversarial moments. Failure only delays the striving, and demands a shift in tactics to meet the new situation.

The work of W.E.B. Du Bois throughout his career indicates the spaces where the liberatory imagination is stifled through misplacing the locus of failure. In this spirit, we can ask again: is the “crisis of the humanities” solely an external campaign of devaluation, or are there also practices within the practices and disciplines that no longer serve us? As I have shown, Du Bois provides a powerful model of scholarship that would allow us to see both the imperative of asking such a question, and provide tools to make such an inquiry. With these tools of moral imperative, critique, and historical materialism that Du Bois grants us, we now understand the power and importance of analyzing moments of failure, rather than taking the narrative of progress as a given. It is tracking and investigating the frame of failure that we come to shift both culpability and expectation, and can recognize instances where further and greater action is needed against the status quo that proclaims structures of inclusion as over or inherently on the way out. This framework ensures a method and analysis of ongoing patterns and an archive of practices to combat the current situation. The problem of the twenty-first century continues to be the problem of the color line. It is only by understanding the failures of progress and the denial of such failures through the narrative of guaranteed progress that we can continue in earnest the fight for liberation.



## Note

1. This article is developed from a paper presented at the panel “What Can W.E.B. Du Bois Teach Us about Contemporary Controversies?” at Villanova University on November 19, 2018, organized by the Villanova Center for Liberal Education.

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