

Book Review

Du Bois, W.E.B. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Achieving justice and equality has always been a struggle. Before women and people of color in the United States could cast their votes and participate in the democratic process, they endured a long and rough fight against the prejudices and biases of a white, male power structure, which defined and restricted them.

W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* depicts problematic concepts about race and socio-economic conditions that prevented disadvantaged people from overcoming unfavorable conditions and asserting their rights as equal citizens. Widely read in sociology, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in essence, examines what it means to be human, prompting people to re-investigate the past concepts about their race and those of others. The book also suggests actions to liberate the disadvantaged people from imposed restriction.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) was a pioneer African-American scholar who significantly contributed to African-American literature. He was an advocate for racial equality, a fighter for suffrage for people of color and women, and a humanist who believed in the potential of human beings if they are provided equal opportunities and access to education. Du Bois was a source of inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr., who led the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

Originally published in 1903 and subsequently revised in 1953, *the Souls of Black Folk* is the most remarkable work of

Du Bois'. The book is a collection of fourteen essays that weave various accounts of African-Americans through discussions of race, politics, education, autoethnography, fiction, poetry and music. Du Bois challenges the misconception of African-Americans as biologically inferior. For him, racial differences were the product of structural social problems, such as the lack of opportunities for blacks in higher education and political participation as well as various other social barriers. This concept of race was inextricably linked with issues of class and social injustice. He pointed out, "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line". It was the "color-line" rather than biology that set the boundary, segregating the black and white folks.

Du Bois approached the problem of race by investigating the history of African-Americans. In Chapter I, Du Bois examined how the notion of race developed, and how past history shaped the African-American people. He explained the concept of the veil of race, a metaphor of the worldview worn by all the African-Americans, rendering different visions of their power, potential, access to resources, education and economic opportunities. The concept of the veil led to the problem of the color-line. Du Bois also suggested that African-Americans experienced double-consciousness—this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others". He questioned what it was like to be black—suggesting that racial identity becomes a problem in the context of American culture.

In addition, Du Bois critiqued education and emphasized its importance to human empowerment. He believed that education must develop men. From Chapter III to

Chapter VI, he shared his views on education. He criticized Booker T. Washington, an African-American educator who was the spokesman for blacks at the time. Du Bois disagreed with Washington's suggestion that blacks should give up their political power, conform to segregation, and use education to develop technical skills. Du Bois argued that these compromises might limit the potential of black Americans. By setting the bar low for black achievement, they put the burden solely on African-American shoulders. In contrast, DuBois argued, "in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs" (p. 131).

Du Bois also pointed out that socio-economic conditions were changed by the advent of progress and wealth and suggested that the modern economy reorganized means of subsistence for the people of color. "The country is rich, yet the people are poor" (p. 171). In Chapter VII-X, he addressed the lack of land ownership that plagued the people of color, adding more adversities to their livelihood. He highlighted the fact that racial discrimination against African-Americans cast apocryphal stereotypes, portraying them as lazy, gullible, and violent.

In the later chapters, he recounted personal stories of American-Americans in the black Church. Throughout his work, Du Bois' text is organized around music. The last chapter "Of the Sorrow Songs" discusses the musical legacy of the black folks' sorrow songs, which were rooted in the miserable life of slavery. He argued that these sorrow songs represented a black folk culture and spiritualism.

What could one do to solve this complex problem of race? Du Bois posited that African-Americans should emancipate themselves by altering their views about being black and developing self-pride. He also advocated for the rights to political participation, education, access to decent job opportunities, and support from state and federal institutions for African-Americans to thrive. Not only would such improvements be good for black Americans but also for American society as a whole.

In essence, Du Bois was a humanist who strongly believed in the potential of people to thrive and flourish. He called for a change in the prevailing discourse imposed by the privileged class, which impeded the progress of minorities. Despite being written a century ago, the book is still relevant; it provides a fundamental on how we look at others as human beings. Du Bois saw people as inherently equal, and as such his message is timeless and universal. He called out the urgency and the significance of our actions to alter pre-established views that suppress marginalized segments of the population.

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