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CHAPTER

44 Redress or Socialism? W. E. B. Du Bois's Silence on Black American Reparations

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Abstract

This chapter examines W. E. B. Du Bois's views regarding claims for reparations for Black Americans descendants of persons enslaved in the United States, deriving from the multigenerational impact of slavery, legal segregation, and ongoing discrimination and stigmatization. The chapter insists that a comprehensive reparations program must include a specific plan to compensate victims and heirs, whether in monetary or nonmonetary fashion. Although Du Bois's analysis in *Black Reconstruction* could undergird substantive claims for reparations, he limited the national claim for redress to removal of restrictions denying equal access to crucial arenas, especially electoral politics and employment. Furthermore, he actually opposed monetary payments. This chapter characterizes Du Bois's endgame as a domestic and international socialist revolution that neglects a call for reparations. It concludes that identifying Du Bois as a progenitor of the contemporary reparations movement obscures his refusal to demand compensation for the community victimized by American white supremacy.

Keywords: [reparations](#), [redress](#), [socialism](#), [Black Reconstruction](#), [Civil Rights](#), [slavery](#), [American economic development](#), [Cotton Tax plan](#)

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Reparations in the form of direct payments to victims is a key policy recommendation as one component of a “racially restorative economic rights agenda” intended to achieve economic equity over the long term.¹ Grieve Chelwa, Darrick Hamilton, and James Stewart declare that “A well-conceived and implemented reparations program would provide a retrospective, direct and parsimonious approach to achieve racial

justice and directly [address] the Black-White racial wealth gap; moreover, it requires ... public responsibility and atonement for the nation's long history of racial injustice."² In the United States, the federal government is assigned principal liability for creating and maintaining the system of oppression that constitutes the basis for contemporary reparations demands.

Surprisingly, it is not clear that W. E. B. Du Bois supported the type of reparations payments protocols championed by many contemporary analysts and advocates. Indeed, the only use of the term "reparations" by Du Bois we have uncovered referenced forms of restitution for former colonies in Africa, and, even here, there is no specific plan proposed for monetary distribution.

In his 1917 essay, "The Negro's Fatherland," Du Bois declared, in appreciation for the role of African American troops in achieving an Allied victory in World War I, "It would be the least that Europe could do in return and some faint reparation for the terrible world history between 1441 and 1861 to see that a great free central African state is erected out of German East Africa and the Belgian Congo."³ He maintained that "Out of this state we could make a great modern effort to restore the ancient efficiency of the land that gave the iron age to all the world, and that for ages led in agriculture, weaving, metal working, and the traffic of the market place."⁴

p. 868 Du Bois was even less transparent with respect to reparations demands when he addressed the possible developments following World War II in his limited call for redress published in the Preface to *Color and Democracy*.

[T]he present war has made it clear that we can no longer regard Western Europe and North America as the world for which civilization exists; nor can we look upon European culture as the norm for all peoples. Henceforth the majority of the inhabitants of the earth, who happen for the most part to be colored, must be regarded as having the right and capacity to share in human progress and to become copartners in that democracy which alone can ensure peace among men, by the abolition of poverty, the education of the masses, protection from disease, and the scientific treatment of crime.⁵

These views are in line with Du Bois's sustained evasion of a call for compensatory payments. For example, consider his 1906 essay, "The Economic Future of the Negro."

For any set of intelligent men like you, to think that a mass of two million laborers can be thrust into modern competitive industry and maintain themselves, when the state refuses their children decent schools and allows them no voice or influence in the making of the laws or their interpretation or administration, is to me utterly inconceivable.⁶

Nevertheless, the claim persists that Du Bois's writings provide the framework for a model of redress that can provide guidance for efforts to advance the objectives of the contemporary black reparations movement. In separate commentaries, Lawrie Balfour and Reiland Rabaka contend that the basis for a case for Black reparations is embedded in Du Bois's work despite the fact he never advocated direct monetary payments to Black American descendants of US slavery.⁷

Rabaka, in particular, argues there are many forms reparations could take apart from outright financial compensation.

Financial or monetary compensation is merely one item on the modern reparations movement's multipoint program. In fact, many reparations theorists argue that compensation can and should take various forms, examples of which include, but are not limited to: free housing, free health care, free education (from grade school to college), and free economic/entrepreneurial development funds.⁸

Rabaka then locates Du Bois as a predecessor of and inspiration for supporters of alternatives to direct payments as restitution. “Free housing, free health care, free education ... and free economic/entrepreneurial funds” for everyone cannot be construed as reparations. Du Bois never called for policies of these types exclusively for Black American who had been enslaved or their progeny.

p. 869 Furthermore, Rabaka argues that Du Bois’s embrace of Pan Africanist ideology necessarily leads to the reparations project.

With regard to the modern reparations movement, Du Bois’s pioneering work with the Pan-African movement and his efforts to argue for redress for anti-African racist wrongdoing and human rights abuses—by bringing the United States and other European imperial powers before the League of Nations and the United Nations—register as clear-cut examples of some of the ways in which his radical thought contributes to modern reparations discourse. The contention here, however, is not that Du Bois put forward a systematic or sophisticated reparations argument, but that there is a sense in which his thinking, at specific intervals in his oeuvre, lays a philosophical foundation and provides paradigms for modern African reparations arguments.⁹

However, a commitment to Pan-Africanist ideology need not lead, inevitably, to a commitment to a call for reparations. In fact, there is a deep strand of Pan-Africanism intentional in its charge that African peoples collectively must act independently and in a wholly self-sufficient manner. This strand of Pan-Africanism might even view it as an act of submission to have African peoples seek resources, even of a compensatory sort, from White imperialists.¹⁰

In building the case for treating Du Bois as a progenitor of today’s reparations movement, these authors focus primary attention on the analysis of the economics of slavery included in his monumental treatise, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). While the general significance of Du Bois’s exposition is unquestionable, the content is inadequate to undergird a comprehensive theory of reparations, in part because it does not incorporate a specific call for restitution.

A close reading of *Black Reconstruction* reveals shortcomings in Du Bois’s analysis that may have contributed to his failure to call for compensatory payments for the formerly enslaved and their descendants. Curiously, it does not appear that Du Bois actually viewed the exploitation of slave labor in the United States as contributing directly to the nation’s growth and development. If anything, Du Bois characterized slavery as an outdated system of production that placed seemingly irrational expenses on the slaveholders themselves.

[S]lavery was the economic lag of the 16th century carried over into the 19th century, and bringing by contrast and by friction moral lapses and political difficulties. It has been estimated that the Southern states had in 1860 three billion invested in slaves, which meant that slaves and land represented the mass of their capital. Being generally convinced that Negroes could only labor as slaves, it was easy for them to become further persuaded that slaves were better off than white workers and that the South had a better labor system than the North, with extraordinary possibilities in industrial and social development.¹¹

p. 870 “Easy for them to” believe, but, from Du Bois’s perspective the belief was false.

The economic difficulties that thus faced the planter in exploiting the black slave were curious. Contrary to the trend of his age, he could not use higher wage to induce better work or a larger supply of labor. He could not allow his labor to become intelligent, although intelligent labor would greatly increase the production of wealth. He could not depend on voluntary immigration unless the immigrants be slaves, and he must bear the burden of the old and sick and could only balance this by child labor and the labor of women.¹²

Thus, in *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois, generally, treated slavery in the United States as an atavistic mode of production that retarded American economic development, a virtual albatross around the necks of the slaveholders, who, nevertheless, were willing to go to war to preserve the system.¹³ His position contrasts sharply with those taken by an array of scholars who considered slavery, no matter how evil, as profitable to the slaveowners, economically viable, and a vital element of American economic growth. From their point of view, slavery was not an atavistic throwback to more primitive methods of production, and it would not have disappeared gradually from the US economy in the absence of a Civil War.¹⁴

Dissection of Du Bois's position regarding reparations requires a clear delineation of what the term is intended to encompass. William Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen define reparations "as a program of acknowledgement, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice."¹⁵ The construct of redress they employ includes "restitution," a key component of which is financial payments to victims. The authors argue that an invoice be forwarded "directly to the U.S. Congress" because "[t]he U.S. government, as the federal authority, bears responsibility for sanctioning, maintaining, and enabling slavery, legal segregation, and continued racial inequality."¹⁶

As noted above, some reparations proponents have offered alternative approaches to obtaining compensation, but a reparations plan or theory without a compensation component, whether monetary or nonmonetary, specifically for the injured party, is basically vacuous. Both Rabaka and Balfour acknowledge that it is quite possible that Du Bois would have demurred from aligning himself with the contemporary reparations movement.

Rabaka says, for instance, that "Du Bois's theory of reparations does not spell out in any accessible or clearly defined terms what appropriate or adequate compensation should entail and, therefore, leaves the door open for the white ruling race/class to wiggle their way out of reparations."¹⁷ Even Balfour, who claims Du Bois as a parent of the modern reparations effort and who "use[s] the term 'reparations' quite broadly ... [to reflect] the range of proposals that have been included under the umbrella of reparations," admits "[t]his is not to say that Du Bois himself would endorse a campaign for reparations."¹⁸

p. 871 There is also strong evidence that Du Bois actually opposed direct monetary transfers, perhaps because of a belief that the federal government would not consider this type of remuneration even in the face of incontrovertible evidence of the horrendous harms imposed on African Americans. Although Du Bois's opposition to the Cotton Tax initiative focuses specifically on what he perceived as an unrealistic expectation that the federal government would ever implement such a program, it may also reflect his disdain for projects that were not originated by the Talented Tenth. Indeed, the claim for \$68 million in restitution pursued in the legal sphere by attorney Cornelius Jones was prompted by Callie House, a Tennessee laundry cleaner who had been born into slavery.¹⁹

Du Bois's attack on the Cotton Tax plan in "The Latest Craze" was, de facto, a global rejection of House's reparations movement writ large, without mentioning House explicitly. House had formed the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief and Pension Association in 1898, an organization that lobbied Congress for pensions for the formerly enslaved.²⁰ The effort thrived until House was imprisoned in 1916 by the Justice Department for allegedly engaging in mail fraud.²¹ Ironically, the fundamental argument the government used to indict and convict House was identical with Du Bois's position: House had engaged in fraud because she encouraged her followers to pursue a policy that the United States never would adopt.

Du Bois's reaction to the movement led by House again highlights a fundamental problem with respect to what can be euphemistically characterized as Du Bois's "Theory of Reparations." Rabaka himself observed that "Du Bois did good on identifying who committed the injustice and determining the nature of the injustice, but failed to follow through on articulating what African Americans, the victims of these human rights violations, want and deserve as a result of and repair for these injustices."²² Furthermore, Rabaka

noted, “Du Bois’s theory of reparations does not spell out in any accessible or clearly defined terms what appropriate or adequate compensation should entail and, therefore, leaves the door open for the white ruling race/class to wiggle their way out of reparations.”²³

In his concluding barb in “The Latest Craze”, Du Bois sarcastically remarked, “This, however, does not worry that ‘Attorney of Record’ who lightly says that even if the money is not there his organization proposes to claim it. Of course, he can claim it and they may also claim the moon but the chance of getting the one is about as great as that of getting the other.”²⁴ Presumably, Du Bois anticipated that a global socialist revolution, of which he was an ardent proponent, had more realistic prospects than reparations or claiming the moon.

Vincene Verdun’s analysis of reparations includes a note that summarizes an interview with the iconic freedom fighter, Queen Mother Audrey Moore. The note indicates that Moore talked at length with Du Bois regarding the need to fight for reparations. Moore reported that Du Bois “did not accept reparations at first but began to ‘come around’ prior to his death.”²⁵ Since Du Bois died in 1963, this revelation suggests that Du Bois did not support reparations at the time that he penned *Black Reconstruction*.

Du Bois’s perspective regarding the Nazi Holocaust also offers useful insights regarding his views regarding reparations. In a 1948 newspaper column, Du Bois opined “The plight of Jews throughout the world has been even harder and more desperate than anything the Negroes have passed through in modern times.”²⁶ This comment was advanced to support his call for the removal of barriers to the relocation of Jewish migrants to Palestine; however, nowhere in this editorial or in any of his other comments regarding the Holocaust does Du Bois call for reparations. Notably Holocaust victims received some \$86.8 Billion payments in restitution from the German government between 1945 and 2018.²⁷

Reparations commentators who claim Du Bois as a reparations advocate should interrogate carefully his views regarding the peonage system that continued to exploit newly emancipated Blacks after the collapse of Reconstruction. Darity and Mullen declare, “Where African Americans are concerned, the grievous injustices that make the case for reparations include slavery, legal segregation (Jim Crow), and ongoing discrimination and stigmatization.”²⁸ The import of this statement is that a comprehensive reparations theory should not limit the case for compensation to the monumental harms inflicted on African Americans prior to the Civil War.

In a similar vein, Jeffrey Brown makes the case for a “Structural Theory of Reparations” insisting that “embracing a historically grounded understanding of structural reparations will reveal that many of the prudential black institutional problems prevalent during the Reconstruction era continue to impede black progress in the postindustrial era.”²⁹ Continuing, Brown maintains that “the idea of structural reparations is a pragmatic alternative to other slavery reparations strategies. It suggests that linking this idea to the unfulfilled goals of Black Reconstruction can overcome the conceptual and prudential barriers that have impeded substantive slavery reparations progress.”³⁰

Du Bois opined in 1910, “All things considered, it seems probable that if the South had been permitted to have its way in 1865 the harshness of Negro slavery would have been mitigated so as to make slave-trading difficult, and to make it possible for a Negro to hold property and appear in some cases in court; but that in most other respects the Blacks would have remained in slavery.”³¹ That same year he declared in an article that appeared in the *Cincinnati Times Star* that the “Negro Is Still Slave.”³²

The next year Du Bois carefully analyzed how the exploitation of Blacks was accomplished following the collapse of Reconstruction, explaining “the master had still the land and the tools. He contracted with the labourer to furnish him with food and clothes as usual, and also a certain wage. But the food, etc., was to be ‘advanced’ to the labourer and charged against him at a certain price in the master’s books. Moreover, no wages were to be paid him until the crop was harvested.”³³

Elaborating further, he insisted, “Fully two-thirds of the freed hands found themselves therefore working on the same plantations as before under practically the same conditions. They got their advances of food, etc., once a week, and at the end of the year they usually found that they had consumed all the wages due them and perhaps more, and stood naked to sign for another year’s slavery.”³⁴

Although Du Bois’s analysis clearly establishes a basis for reparations claims for peonage, as was the case for his later examination of exploitation during the era of enslavement in *Black Reconstruction*, he failed to incorporate a call for restitution for victims. Wherever analysts position Du Bois along the redress–reparations continuum, it is important to recognize that achieving redress that enabled African Americans to thrive within the existing capitalist system was not Du Bois’s endgame. Rather, Du Bois favored a socialist reconstruction of both the United States and the world at large.

p. 873 As was the case for his discussions of domestic redress, there was no call for monetary payments as part of his call for domestic or international socialism. His vision of a nondiscriminatory inclusive domestic socialist regime in the United States was set forth as the “Basic Negro Creed” included in an unpublished 1937 manuscript, “A World Search for Democracy.”³⁵ Three elements of the “Creed” are of special significance for our discussion:

E. We believe that the labor force and intelligence of twelve million people is more than sufficient to supply their own wants and make their advancement secure. Therefore, we believe that, if carefully and intelligently planned, a cooperative Negro industrial system in America can be established in the midst of and in conjunction with the surrounding national industrial organization and in intelligent accord with that reconstruction of the economic basis of the nation which must sooner or later be accomplished.

I. We conceive this matter of work and equality of adequate income is not the end of our effort, but the beginning of the rise of the colored races in this land and the world over, in power, learning and accomplishment.

J. We believe in the use of our vote for equalizing wealth through taxation, for vesting the ultimate power of the state in the hands of workers; and as an integral part of the working class, we demand our proportionate share in administration and public expenditure. But we know that control of capital by the masses is fundamental to all political and social power.

All three propositions demonstrate Du Bois’s commitment to a redress approach to societal transformation, but there is no call for funding; rather the call is limited to the removal of patently oppressive public policies. Indeed, Du Bois’s conception of “redress” calls for the restructuring of American society (as well as global society)—something presumably of universal benefit—but not a plan of monetary restitution directed at Black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States (nor African descendants elsewhere—however defined). Perhaps Du Bois can be accurately labeled a “Civil Rights socialist.”

In fact, Du Bois specifically used the term “redress” in the title of the 1947 edited document *An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights for Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress*. Unfortunately, the title is misleading because what Du Bois calls for instead of specific compensation for “Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States” is the equivalent of a socialist revolution that will benefit the American working class as a whole.³⁶

Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented here we offer the following assessment of the significance of Du Bois's perspective for the contemporary Black reparations movement.

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1. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois produced a pathbreaking work analyzing the mechanisms by which African American labor was systematically exploited during the era of enslavement that were subsequently reformulated to reverse gains achieved by Blacks following the Civil War. However, in that particular study, he did not make the case that exploitation of Black labor under slavery was a rational and effective mechanism, albeit wholly immoral, for promoting national economic development for the benefit of White people.
 2. Du Bois's analysis in *Black Reconstruction* had the potential to undergird substantive claims for reparations payments to Blacks for the horrendous harms experienced during and after enslavement. Yet he failed to pursue this line of argument, instead adopting a call for redress limited to the removal of restrictions that denied equal access to participation in crucial areas including electoral politics and employment.
 3. Du Bois reaffirmed his commitment to redress-oriented public policies in both the domestic and international arenas in several other economic commentaries published both before and after the release of *Black Reconstruction*.
 4. Efforts to claim Du Bois as a progenitor of the contemporary reparations effort requires maneuvering with a model of redress that denies compensation to the particular victimized community, whether in monetary or nonmonetary form.
 5. Many current initiatives at the state and local levels presented as reparations programs are more appropriately characterized as racial equity projects because they avoid placing responsibility on the federal government, and they do not recognize the inability of states and localities to amass resources sufficient to meet the debt that is owed.
 6. Finally, we are left with the paradox of the author of one of the most profound dissections of the establishment of a regime of anti-Black atrocities in the aftermath of the Civil War in *Black Reconstruction* actively rejecting the idea of monetary compensation or *true* reparations for Black Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States.

Notes

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 24. The IRS statement, “The Truth About Frivolous Tax Arguments — Section I (D to E),” states “No provision in the Internal Revenue Code allows taxpayers to claim a ‘Black Tax Credit’ or a credit for Native American reparations. It is a well settled principle of law that deductions and credits are a matter of legislative grace.” <https://www.irs.gov/privacy-disclosure/the-truth-about-frivolous-tax-arguments-section-i-d-to-e>
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