RACIAL POLITICS AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS: EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION IN AN INESCAPABLY DIVERSE POLITY

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ABSTRACT

Political power and ethnoracial, cultural, and/or religious identities often interact such that clear patterns of political empowerment and exclusion emerge along demographic lines. One could try to eliminate the interaction itself, either by eliminating minority race identity within mainstream politics via assimilation, or by eliminating mainstream politics from the activities of minority raced individuals via separation. I propose that public schools pursue neither of these approaches. Rather, schools should teach a kind of Du Boisian "double consciousness" to all children, majority and minority alike, in order to promote the coexistence of individuals' ethnoracial and civic identities via multiple perspective-taking and power analysis. By learning to recognize the particularity of their own perspectives and access to power, including the ways in which their ethnoracial and cultural identities help shape those perspectives and powers, young people will be better equipped to recognize and fight against ethnocultural bias in the civic sphere.

Political power and ethnoracial, cultural, and/or religious identities often interact such that clear patterns of political empowerment and exclusion emerge along demographic lines. These patterns need not be linked to explicit or even intentional discrimination. Rather, they may be reflections in the contemporary civic and political spheres of long-standing historical inequalities that continue to permeate social structures and relationships despite legal and other reforms. How should these patterns of difference be treated in the civic and political spheres? What implications do they have for political and civic educators? In this essay, I explore these questions in the context of the United States, which suffers an unjust, antidemocratic, and strikingly tenacious civic empowerment gap along lines of race, ethnicity, and class (Levinson 2010). Although the United States offers a unique context in many ways, I believe that the reflections that follow also have broader applicability.

Given the many ways in which mainstream political power and race/ethnicity unjustly interact, some people have proposed that the interaction itself must be eliminated, either by eliminating minority race identity within mainstream politics, or by eliminating mainstream politics from the activities of minority raced individuals. The first approach is assimilationist.[1] From the assimilationist perspective, ethnoracial minorities are most likely to achieve equality by competing as equal individuals in the political and economic playing field. "The issues are honor, dignity, respect, and self-respect, all of which are preconditions for true equality between any peoples. The classic interplay between the aggrieved black and the guilty white, in which the former demands (and the latter conveys) a recognition of the historical injustice is, quite simply, not an exchange among equals" (Dawson 2001: 288, quoting Glenn Loury). Rather than making claims as a raced person or on behalf of a ethnoracial group, individuals are exhorted to "cast down your bucket where you are" (Washington 2004: 129) and master the knowledge and skills necessary for success within society as it currently exists. This approach may be seen in many U.S. "no excuses" schools like KIPP, where they explicitly teach kids to adopt white, middle class cultural norms, and language. Success in these schools is

likewise measured by students' capacities to gain entry into and succeed in traditional high-status, usually majority-white secondary and higher education institutions.

The second approach is separatist: in African American thought, where it has been most developed within the United States, it takes the form of black nationalism in political thought and Afrocentrism in educational practice. From this perspective, ethnoracial minority group members should create their own autonomous political and economic institutions rather than try to integrate into those mainstream institutions controlled by whites, since the latter is inevitably doomed to failure. Black nationalist philosophies, of which there are many (Dawson 2001), tend to be reflected in schools that teach an Afrocentric or other ethnoracially- or culturally-specific curriculum. Afrocentrism takes nearly as many forms as black nationalism (Binder 2002). In general, however, students learn that blacks have historically been a great and self-sustaining people and they can and should continue this legacy of collective achievement and self-determination. Collaboration and coalition-building across ethnoracial lines is usually discouraged in favor of ethnoracially separate empowerment.

I propose that public schools pursue neither of these approaches. Rather, I would encourage us to take on the description of the problem—and the proposed solution—that W. E. B. Du Bois provides in the opening essay of *The Souls of Black Folk.* It is worth quoting at length:

> *[T]he 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 looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - 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.*
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> *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.*
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> *This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.* (Du Bois 1996 [1903]: 5)

Full-scale assimilation is the death that Du Bois rejects. Political separatism is the isolation that he also rejects. In their stead, he pleads for the achievement of a "better and truer self" that represents a true "merger"—or perhaps simultaneity—of individuals' ethnoracial and civic identities. Neither need dominate or eliminate the other. Rather, they can coexist and even inform one another. It is possible to be truly American *as* an ethnoracialized being, and to be truly an ethnoracialized group member in part *through* one's political and even patriotic engagement.

What does this mean in pedagogical practice? Although translating principles into pedagogies is never a simple one-to-one correspondence, some educational implications stand out. First, young people should be taught to recognize the particularity of their own perspective, including the ways in which their ethnoracial and cultural identities help shape those perspectives. This is an important lesson for all young people to learn, including majority group members, as they are most likely to be unaware of diverse perspectives and to view their own identities and experiences as the unquestioned norm. They do not suffer the "double consciousness" of which Du Bois speaks. In Du Bois' eyes, of course, this is basically a good thing; double consciousness is a hardship that could ideally be overcome in a reformed, egalitarian society. But even in a society that permitted the achievement of "a better and truer self," Du Bois "wishes neither of the older selves to be lost." There is a value in recognizing that one's identity has *both* ethnoracial and civic components (and many other elements besides), and that how one both "measures one's [own] soul" and takes the measure of the world will likely be different from how others make the same assessments. These are reasons for majority and minority group members alike to learn how to take multiple perspectives and to develop the inclination to do so. Ideally, this will reduce

the need for minority double consciousness, as "American" will no longer be taken as synonymous with "white."[2] It will also potentially spread such consciousness to whites, insofar as they become conscious of their own limitations of perspective and their own subjection to the gaze and judgment of others.

The skill and habit of multiple perspective-taking serves many salutary civic functions. In addition to helping students recognize that their own civic identity isn't any more "normal" or "natural" than others'—in other words, that there's not just one way to be "American" or to be patriotic, say—students' capacities and inclination to take multiple perspectives also equip them to recognize and fight against ethnocultural bias. They may be more willing and able to hear testimonies that conflict with or shed new light on their own experiences. They may also be more willing and able to listen for the content of individuals' claims, rather than being distracted by the clothing their fellow citizens are wearing, the colloquialisms they use, or the color of their skin. Citizens' development of the skills and habits of multiple-perspective taking can also mitigate some of the other sources of ethnoracial civic inequality I discussed earlier. Majority group members who are skilled at taking multiple perspectives may find it easier to recognize, comprehend, and take seriously the beliefs and norms espoused by minority group members—both when their context makes common norms seem unfamiliar (such as when Muslim headscarves inspire anxiety while nuns' habits do not), and when truly different norms are asserted that majority group members would prefer to reinterpret into something more familiar.

One important additional way in which these skills and habits of perspective-taking can be taught in a civic and political context is to teach power analysis. Power is often invisible to those who have it; it is so naturally woven into the fabric of their existence that those with power are able to exercise it unintentionally and even unconsciously. Consider the powers that derive from being well-dressed, exuding a confident air, speaking the majority and/or elite language fluently, being a member of the majority group, knowing professionals who have unpaid summer internships to offer, having the financial security to take a promising unpaid internship instead of a job bagging groceries, being contacted by political campaigns looking to secure votes among a powerful demographic, having one's views represented on local and national media outlets, or living in a community that is producing rather than bleeding jobs. These sources of power and opportunity are usually invisible to those who wield them, while they are painfully evident to those without similar access. Many also have a significant ethnoracial component. If students are taught to recognize and analyze these kinds and sources of power, therefore, they may similarly come to understand and respect how and why others' interpretations of the world differ meaningfully from their own.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] James Baldwin eloquently rejects this ideal when he laments that, "White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption—which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards—is revealed in…the unfortunate tone with which so many liberals address their Negro equals. It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal" (Baldwin 1962: 94).

[2] See (Lee 2005) for an account of the pervasiveness of the equivalence of "White" with "American" among first- and second-generation immigrant Hmong youth.