I. PROLOGUE

In 1899, one year after completing what many consider to be the first real Black Study, his magisterial sociological analysis, *The Philadelphia Negro*, W.E.B. Du Bois addressed the American Academy in Philadelphia and proposed what might also be considered the first real Black Research Agenda.

To the white scholars gathered in Philadelphia, Du Bois proposed a path-breaking study of the Negro people:

> The American Negro deserves study for the great end of advancing the cause of science in general. No such opportunity to watch and measure the history and development of a great race of people ever presented itself to the scholars of a modern nation. If they miss this opportunity—if they do the work in a slipshod, unsystematic manner—*if they dally with the truth* to humor the whims of the day, they do far more than hurt the good name of the American people; they hurt the cause of scientific truth the world over. .” (emphasis mine) [1]

However, persuaded that they were already in possession of ‘the truth’ about race, and perhaps equally unpersuaded that Negroes belonged to ‘a great race of people,’ the Academy declined to participate in Du Bois’s project.

Characteristically then, and largely unaided, Du Bois, for the next twenty years—first from Atlanta and later from New York—pursued the racial research we now know as the famous Atlanta University Studies; constructing virtually single-handedly, to all intents
and purposes, what was the first Black Studies program in America. (By celebrating Du Bois in this way, there is no intent to slight George Washington Williams, who Vincent Harding calls “the first substantial scholarly historian of Blacks in America,”[2] and whose 1883 opus, History Of The Negro Race In America From 1619-1880 V2: Negros As Slaves, As Soldiers, And As Citizens, still stands as the original foundational text of black history. Nor can one overlook Carter G. Woodson, generally regarded as the Father of Negro History. Rather one wishes simply to call attention to the fact that in regard to Black Studies, Du Bois was, as in so much else, there “at the creation.”)

But Du Bois’s work in pursuit of the truth about the race’s past and present increasingly led him into a collision with America’s self-definition as a “democratic land” which, despite its negligible “negro problem,” still saw and proclaimed itself, in the classical Panglossian sense, “the best of all possible worlds.”

**Du Bois vs. the Historical Establishment**

Du Bois’s confrontation with the American historiography that had not changed its opinion of the essential unworthiness of the Negro in the three plus decades since Philadelphia, came to a head in 1935 when he published his seminal reinterpretation of the Reconstruction era, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880.

Concluding the volume with a chapter entitled, “The Propaganda of History,” Du Bois charged that “the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery, the North was ashamed because it had to call in the black men to save the Union, abolish slavery and establish democracy” (emphasis mine).[3]

This critique was both revolutionary and heretical since it not only attributed what we now routinely describe as “agency” to black people but it also struck a Joe Louis-like blow against white supremacy by asserting that black people had been the Salvationists of the Civil War Republic! Therefore what Du Bois’s perspective represented and what it called for, implicitly, was a new history of America.

Du Bois made that implication explicit on the global level as well in a 1943 letter to Will Alexander, a special assistant in the office of the War Manpower Commission who had written Du Bois from Washington that “there is a small group of scholars here, men of wide experience in international matters, who feel that there is need of a universal history of racism as it has appeared in various places around the world.”[4]

Two weeks after receiving Alexander’s November letter, Du Bois responded from Atlanta “that a universal history of racism would be an excellent undertaking but . . . if you are going to take the wide definition of race including nationalism, minorities, status, slavery, etc., it would be attempting a new universal history on a vast scale” (emphasis mine).[5]

Du Bois’s view that applying a “wide” definition of race to world history would, ipso facto, produce a new historical paradigm, a virtual reformulation of the way that one thought about the past and present world, is what I want to suggest is also both true and necessary for American political history and theory; that the need to reinterrogate the various ways that race and racism have impacted upon and, indeed, shaped the American nation state is also a history that must be reconceptualized “on a vast scale” if we wish to take up Du Bois’s crusade for “scientific truth.”

At bottom, the question that underlies such an enquiry is quite simple: Since public policy and constitutional law in America have sanctioned slavery, segregation,
discrimination and institutional racism, how is it possible to reconcile the democratic theory of the state with the black civic experience? For example, the state may be conceptualized as an autonomous actor, a neutral arbiter, a gendarme, or an instrument of race, class and gender oppression. But whichever way the state is conceived, it unquestionably performs a certain role in allocating wealth, status, privilege and resources to some while withholding those perquisites from others. Moreover, although a taboo subject in conventional American appraisals, the chief means employed by the state and society to maintain and perpetuate the racial social order has been the resort to violence.

Slavery was violent and was only overthrown by violence. Reconstruction was dismantled by violence. The system of Jim Crow rested upon the theory and praxis of violence and the resistance to the freedom movement was, at its core, violent. The challenge, therefore, is to look longitudinally at American political history to try and gain a more accurate understanding of how the Republic has related actually, rather than mythically, to the black presence in its midst. Consider this example both of one problem unexamined and the kind of research needed to bring it to light.

**The Southern Question**

In 1944, Adam Clayton Powell was elected to Congress from Harlem and arrived in Washington in 1945, the last year of World War II’s fight against fascism.[6]

But what did Adam have to contend with once he had taken his seat? He had to contend with the racist rantings of Southern Congressmen like John Rankin of Mississippi who were still freely indulging the epithet “nigger” on the House floor. (Rankin was an equal opportunity bigot since he also assailed columnist Walter Winchell as “a little kike.”)[7]

To his credit, and despite the expectation that freshmen Congressmen were to be seen and not heard, Adam rose after another Rankin outburst to say that “the time has arrived to impeach Rankin, or at least expel him from the party.”[8]

So how do we theorize about this incident? Were Rankin’s fulminations simply an individual expression of racist sentiment or symptomatic of something more organic to American political life? What, for example, did the apparent tolerance of the behavior signify? And how far back did this normative racism go? All the way back to 1790? Or was it only a twentieth century phenomenon? That is, did racial insults abate in Congress during the thirty years, from 1871 to 1901, when black men sat in the Congress? _In fine, what is the historical record of racist discourse—and the advancement of racist interests--in the House and Senate of the United States?_ Researching that question in the Congressional Record, the Congressional Globe, _et al._, would be a massive undertaking—and aside from William Lee Miller’s _Arguing about Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress_ (Knopf, 1995) which details the 1830’s Congressional fight over petitions against slavery--so far as I know no one has yet done it. But questions such as these need to be answered if we are ever to truly fathom the nature of the American racial state.

Also one might raise many other questions about Dixiecrat power for one’s research agenda, like the political side of the reparations question. For while the subject of reparations for unpaid slave labor has generated heated political discussion for decades, there has been no similar effort to systematically appraise the cost of federal programs and public policy which the South steered to itself on the backs of the expropriated political power of disenfranchised Blacks.
We know, for example, that the Freedmen’s Bank was burgled by government-affiliated speculators after the Civil War. We know that many black veterans of World War I were never given their pensions. We know that the Union army paid its black soldiers only half of what they paid white soldiers until black soldier protest and war exigencies forced the government to relent in the last year of the war. And we know that the funds of the New Deal programs were discriminatorily disbursed during the Depression. But we can’t put a dollar figure on these serial betrayals by the national government nor on the spin-off benefits which the South enjoyed because of its stolen political power. How many public projects and military bases were sited in the former Confederacy, one wonders? And government subsidies? And tax breaks?

The questions are endless but the answers will help us illuminate the suppressed dimension of the American racial state.

So where might we begin? At the beginning, of course, with the sacrosanct foundation myths of American exceptionalism.

II. ON THE POLITICS OF MISREPRESENTATION

“The United States was the land of captivity, of slavery rather than liberty, and the discovery of the New World represented not the founding of a shining city on a hill but the start of the crime against Africans.”[9] --Manisha Sinha

The problem of reinterpreting America’s history and politics is only partly a problem of new discovery since much of the actual history is known. It exists in records, documents, oral history and in books, both old and new.

The problem is that non-mainstream history is an embarrassment to the national myths that make up America’s identity so it is banished from the national memory; hidden from national view; concealed behind what Du Bois called The Veil. What we are left with is invented history, abetted by various “masking devices” such as historical patterns that go uncommented upon; euphemistic language such as “landed gentry” instead of slave-owners; “racial riots” instead of pogroms; “violence” instead of murder; “harassment and intimidation” instead of racial terror, ad infinitum. (emphasis mine) Another ploy is the examination of the “thoughts” and “minds” of Great White Men while shying away from their deeds.

But the most persistent disguising tradition has been simply to ignore the messenger. . . the fate of most black critical voices over the ages. Indeed, Manisha Sinha, in the January 2007 issue of the William and Mary Quarterly, points out that “Historians have yet to fully appreciate the alternative and radical nature of black abolitionist ideology. . . [that] not only pointed to the shortcomings of American revolutionary ideals but also exposed their complicity in upholding racial slavery.”[10] And, if ignoring the messenger did not suffice, then the reaction was to professionally slay the renegade scholar. That was the fate meted out to the late Fawn Brodie whose 1974 volume, Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History, dared to suggest an “intimate relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings. . .” Her reward was to be almost unanimously pilloried by the academic establishment. So what, at bottom, are we dealing with?

Is America just another case of national vanity run amok since nearly all societies, like nearly all religions, tend to think of themselves as special and adhere to creation myths which attest to their uniqueness? Or is something more at stake? Something like America’s aspiration to world leadership based on its self-image of being specially favored and specially blessed? It is to answer that question that one turns to the past
because it is the past which best contextualizes today’s diabolical policies of preemptive war, international kidnappings, secret prisons, sanctioned torture, the gulag of Guantanamo, the excesses of the FBI and the administration’s scornful disregard of the Constitution, the Geneva Convention, and the right of habeas corpus.

The past conceptualizes these practices because, although chronologically new, they are remarkably akin to deeds which Du Bois deplored some fifty years ago:

There was a day when the world rightly called Americans honest even if crude; earning their living by hard work; telling the truth no matter whom it hurt; and going to war in what they believed a just cause after nothing else seemed possible. Today we are lying, stealing and killing. We call all this by finer names: Advertising, Free Enterprise, and National Defense. But names in the end deceive no one; today we use science to help us deceive our fellows; we take wealth that we never earned and we are devoting all our energies to kill, maim and drive insane men, women, and children who dare refuse to do what we want done. No nation threatens us. We threaten the world. [11] (emphasis mine.)

Seem familiar?

The significance of Du Bois’s critique is that he saw America not as most Americans see it but through his own racial lens; utilizing the second sight he had gained as a lifelong racial outsider in the land of his birth:

Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshipper at the shrine of the established social order and of the economic development into which I was born. But just that part of this order which seemed to most of my fellows nearest perfection, seemed to me most inequitable and wrong; and starting from that critique I, gradually, as the years went by, found other things to question in my environment. [12] (emphasis mine)

So Fawn Brodie questioned an icon while Du Bois questioned the “social order.” Both interrogations suggest new interpretative spaces where the meaning of America can be remapped in order to investigate the line of historical continuity from the international slave trade to the multi-national corporation, from the Indian “wars” of yesterday to the Iraqi occupation of today, from America’s oft-invoked democratic claims to its oft-enacted undemocratic actions.

III. ON RACIAL (AND OTHER) CONTRADICTIONS OF AMERICA’S FOUNDING HISTORY

To review American political history from top to bottom is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. What it seeks to do is reanalyze America’s founding years by piggy-backing on some of the excellent works written both recently and in past years, which have significantly contributed to our understanding of non-mythical American history.

us with a critically new perspective on the role of race in World War II in his *Race War!: White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire* (NYU, 2004) which “delves into forgotten history to reveal how European racism and colonialism were deftly exploited by the Japanese to create allies among formerly colonized people of color.” [14]

The methodology of inquiry will be to carry on a dialogue with these books; outlining what new historical hypotheses they seem to represent and what new questions and issues arising from them might deservedly constitute a research agenda of the future.

IV. THE FOUNDING UNROMATICIZED: COLONIALISM, CAPITALISM, AND CITIZENSHIP BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER

In 1964, Eli Ginsberg and Alfred Eichner published their book *Troublesome Presence: American Democracy and the Black-Americans* (hereafter G&E) which painted quite a different picture of American settlers from the archetypical image of freedom-seeking Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock in 1620. They wrote that. . . “of the several million persons who reached Great Britain’s North American colonies before 1776, it is conservatively estimated that close to 80 percent arrived under some form of servitude.” [15] (emphasis mine)

Since we are accustomed to think of servitude and/or slavery as being the lot only of Africans and their descendants and also know that, as of the first official census in America in 1790, these persons comprised approximately 20 percent of the American population, we are left to wonder about the status of this majority of unknown white settlers. Who were they, these non-Pilgrims?

A partial answer can be found in G&E and also in Gary Nash’s classic work of colonial history, *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early North America (5th Edition)*. Both direct our attention to the Jamestown Landing of 1607 where the two constituent elements of American exceptionalism first came into being, i.e., the awarding of “free” land to the settlers and their gaining of the right to vote. However, both of these bestowals by the architects of the Jamestown project, the Virginia Company of London, arose out of the financial imperatives of settlement not out of any sentiments of democratic idealism. More importantly these concessions were made by the London businessmen whose desperate hope was to turn Jamestown into a successful profit-making enterprise as the Spaniards had done in Mexico and Peru.

Witness Gary Nash:

> The English founded their first permanent settlement in the Americas at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. *But it was not a colony at all. . . Rather it was a business enterprise, the property of the Virginia Company of London, made up of stockholders and a governing board of directors who answered directly to James I.* [16] (emphasis mine)

Thus America was birthed by capitalism, not by freedom. Indeed the Jamestown Project’s partnership between the corporation and the state was to serve as a useful model later in the century when the Royal African Company was granted a monopoly of the English slave trade with West Africa in 1672 by King Charles II.

**Not Colonists But Conquistadors**

We have come to think of slavery and the slave trade as the prime incubators and instigators of American racism with the American South as its birthplace. Except. . .
the first racial slaves in America were not Africans but Indians and the first state to legally sanction slavery was not Virginia in 1661 but Massachusetts in 1641. [17]

Moreover Massachusetts’s involvement in the slave trade antedates even their first slave law, e.g., “The first definitely authenticated American-built vessel to carry slaves was the Desire built in Marblehead [Massachusetts] and sailing out of Salem in 1638 [carrying] a cargo, among other things, of seventeen Pequot Indians, whom she sold in the West Indies.” [18] (emphasis mine) What this neglected history of Indian slavery suggests is that we must see the Indian as well as the African as the original racial “other,” the negation of whose humanity was the dialectical affirmation of white superiority in America; that slavery and the slave trade tie Massachusetts and Virginia together and demonstrate the North-South national pattern of racial exploitation that evolves so seamlessly into racism.

Any new research agenda thus needs to reconceptualize white–Indian along with white-African relations to gain a fuller understanding of the role of race in shaping both the racial and cultural identity of America and in making possible its political and economic development. Volumes such as Almon Lauber’s Indian Slavery in Colonial Times (Amsterdam, NY, 1969 but originally published in 1913), Allan Gallay’s The Indian Slave Trade, 1670-1717 (Yale, New Haven, 2002), and others like Karen Ordahl Kupperman’s Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America (Cornell, NY, 2000) and her most recent book, The Jamestown Project (Harvard, Cambridge, MA, 2007) tell the more inclusive story of how considerations of race dominate early American relations... As we can see by returning to the saga of Virginia:

“In the autumn of 1607... when food supplies were running perilously low and all but a handful of Jamestown settlers had fallen too ill to work, the colony was saved by Powhatan, whose men brought sufficient food to keep the struggling settlement alive until the sick recovered and the relief ship arrived.” [19] (emphasis mine) So Powhatan, more famous in the white-washed history as the father of Pocahontas, saves the Jamestown settlers in 1607, years before the Pilgrims landing and years before the holiday we now celebrate as Thanksgiving. But Powhatan’s life-saving graciousness has gone unlearned, unappreciated, unspoken of—even this year, the 400th anniversary of Jamestown’s Founding. Perhaps that is because, as Du Bois wrote about the black contribution to the Civil War, the settlers were ashamed of being indebted to those whom they considered their inferiors. Or maybe it’s the historians who should be held accountable. Whatever.... In the historical scheme of things, this oversight does not seem to have mattered because the new settlers soon re-righted their racial world at the behest of their superiors; to wit:

In 1609, the royal governor of Jamestown was ordered by the Virginia Company “to effect a military occupation of the region... to make all tribes tributary to him rather than to Powhatan, to extract corn, furs, dyes, and labor from each tribe and, if possible, to mold the natives into an agricultural labor force as the Spanish had done in their colonies.” [20] (emphasis mine)

"As the Spanish had done in their colonies” meant, of course, that the settlers, told to emulate the Spanish conquistadors, were to subjugate the Indians to their will, establish racial rule over them, divide and conquer where possible, appropriate anything of value the Indians might possess—from food provisions to trade goods—and, first and foremost, enslave them... or as the company delicately put it—“mold them into an agricultural labor force.”

But the 30,000 Indians of the Chesapeake would not be “molded.” They perished from the white man’s diseases. They fought back. So the Company had to try a new
business plan of luring settlers to Virginia by promising them free land at the end of seven years labor. But after five years the strategy of trying to turn a profit from these white indentured servants had also not succeeded so the company again raised the inducements for settlement: “This time 100 acres of land was offered outright to anyone in England who would journey to the colony. . . [Thus] Instead of pledging limited servitude for the chance to become sole possessor of the land, an Englishman trapped at the lower rungs of society at home could now become an independent landowner in no more time than it took to reach the Chesapeake.” [21](emphasis mine)

It is in this fashion that American exceptionalism is born via the gift of land which in Europe is owned by the monarchy, the church and the aristocracy. But in America it is made available in a transaction of profit-making speculation. Englishmen “trapped at the lower rungs of society” can then rise to become “independent landowners.”

But there was still one more “gift” to come: “In 1619 the resident governor was ordered to allow the election of a representative assembly, which would participate in governing the colony and thus bind the colonists emotionally to the land.” [22](emphasis mine)

The pillar of democracy, the right to vote, was conferred upon the settlers not by the Goddess of Liberty but by the Goddess of Capitalism, as was the means of social and economic uplift, the land of the Indian. And all of this occurred, we are reminded once again, by 1619—and before the fantasy-ennobling year of 1620. Two other momentous things, whose significance, historian Lerone Bennett, Jr. reminds us, cannot be overstated, also took place in 1619.

Speaking of the first Africans to arrive in British America whom he calls the Jamestown Twenty, Lerone sums up the contradictions of Jamestown which were to become America's own:

“In the months preceding the arrival [of the Africans], the colony had installed the new House of Burgesses [i.e., House of Citizens], formalized a new system of white servitude, shipped its first load of tobacco to England, inaugurated a new system of private property, and welcomed a shipload of brides, who were promptly purchased at the going rate of 120 pounds of tobacco each. Thus, white servitude, black servitude, private property, ‘representative democracy,’ and bride purchase were inaugurated in America at roughly the same time.” [23](emphasis mine)

Or to put it another way, the Jamestown Experiment codified the race, class, gender and political identity of America. It also demolishes the myth of American exceptionalism because it establishes America as simply one of a number of white settler states like the former Rhodesia, South Africa and French Algeria, and those like New Zealand, Australia, et al. who have morphed from those origins to the “civilizations” we see today. Speaking of Australia, we can now answer the question that we posed pages ago about who these non-Pilgrim white colonists were.

Some were servants, and some were indentures and redemptioners as we have seen. Others were slaves like the white women sold at Jamestown, and many were the victims of kidnappings because:

Exporting white indentured servants became a big business... and closely resembled the African slave trade. Drunkards were carried on shipboard. Children were lured away with promises of candy and officials were bribed to
turn over convicted criminals to the procurers... called ‘spirits’ because their victims were spirited away... [24]

But many of these “settlers” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were criminals. Between 1718 and 1785 Britain banished 50,000 convicts to America, a fact rarely cited in American textbooks. [25]. In fact, it seems a matter of some historical discomfort to reveal the fact that America was Britain’s first penal colony. Australia only assumed that role after the American Revolution when America’s shores were closed to that traffic. Indeed the whole subject of white servitude and convict labor has received scant historical attention. But the evidence is there. It just is not permitted to confront or alter the tenets of mainstream history.

Again, Gary Nash:

“The colony had been initiated not by men seeking political or religious freedom but by profit-hungry investors in England and fortune-hunting adventurers and common riffraff from the back alleys and prisons.” [26]

The truth about Jamestown’s history, like the truth about American history itself, is gagged, shunted away in the closet to protect the myth of American perfection. One re-engages with that history not simply to expose unflattering and suppressed truths but because so long as the myth of American perfection reigns, there will be no momentum for change in America. And look at the world around us today. Does it not suggest that change, more than likely, is the only hope that we have left?

“One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over.” -- W.E.B. Du Bois, 1935

his commentary also appears in Souls.

Click here to comment on any article in this issue or see what others are saying in the The BlackCommentator Readers’ Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board Member William L. (Bill) Strickland Teaches political science in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is also the Director of the Du Bois Papers Collection. The Du Bois Papers are housed at the University of Massachusetts library, which is named in honor of this prominent African American intellectual and Massachusetts native. Professor Strickland is a founding member of the independent black think tank in Atlanta the Institute of the Black World (IBW), headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. Strickland was a consultant to both series of the prize-winning documentary on the civil rights movement, Eyes on the Prize (PBS Mini Series Boxed Set), and the senior consultant on the PBS documentary, The American Experience: Malcolm X: Make It Plain. He also wrote the companion book Malcolm X: Make It Plain. Most recently, Professor Strickland was a consultant on the Louis Massiah film on W.E.B. Du Bois - W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices. Click here to contact Mr. Strickland.


The irony of America’s fighting fascism abroad while segregating Blacks in the military and permitting lynching at home inspired the black community in those war years to launch “the double V” campaign: Victory over the enemies without and within.


[8] Ibid.


[12] Ibid., p. 155.

[13]


[21] Ibid., p. 52.

[22] Ibid., p.52.

