

The True Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois

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The objective of the doctoral program in Afro-American studies at the University of

Massachusetts at Amherst is to produce scholars and teachers in the tradition of the department's namesake, W.E.B Du Bois, a native son of Massachusetts who throughout his long life insisted that a commitment to social justice must be rooted in scholarship of the highest order.

Du Bois' central conceptual theme is eloquently captured by his most widely quoted pronouncement: "The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." It would be equally true to say that the problem of the entire sweep of American history and society is the problem of the color line, for from the earliest Colonial days to the present, the role, status and treatment of the African slaves and their descendants have been at the heart of the American story.

Materially, it was the forced labor of the slaves that built the great wealth of the American South and fueled the economic expansion that created the modern American nation. Politically, it was the attempt to accommodate and justify the existence of the institution of slavery and its successor practices that has driven both the formation of the United States and its subsequent politics, all the way to the presidential contest being fought out in this year. Legally, it is the anomaly of slavery that has distorted and contorted the American judicial system for three centuries. And spiritually, it is slavery, and the racism attendant upon it and upon its aftermath, that has fatally corrupted America's claim to be a city shining upon a hill, acting as a moral beacon to mankind. Through their long historical struggles against various forms of racial oppression and by means of their rich cultural heritage, African-Americans have redefined and remade the American experience. In the end, it is the efforts of its disenfranchised that have redeemed America's notions of citizenship and democracy. And it is the oppressed who have bequeathed to America a distinctive tradition in music, dance, art, folklore, literature, language and humor.

Because of the centrality of the role of African-Americans, a consideration of the Afro-American experience is nothing less than a reconsideration of America. Through the prism of Afro-American studies, the light shining from the city upon the hill is fractured into the rainbow of the composite American experience. When that light is re-synthesized, we are presented with a new image of America, an image critical as well as celebratory. Afro-American studies is not, in our conception of it, the Negro quarter in the ghetto of multiculturalism—a vibrant place of strange sounds and smells that the uptown folks can visit on a night out. Afro-American studies is the necessary corrective to a three-centuries-long misappropriation of the American experience by the humanities.

Because the Afro-American experience is as multidimensional as life itself, the study of that experience must range over many disciplines. Once again, Du Bois serves as our guide, for in the vast corpus of his writings, spanning as they do nearly a century, we find history, philosophy, politics, sociology, religion, music, poetry, fiction, the visual and plastic arts and law. Although none of us can lay claim to the entire legacy of this protean man, we aspire as a department to achieve some measure of the universality that was his crowning achievement.

A legacy of this magnitude would be in fact only part of the task Du Bois sets us by his example, for throughout his life he was a thoroughly engaged and committed activist, working for the advancement of the Negro people and thereby for the liberation of America.

At every stage in his career, he combined rigorous scholarship with social and political action, never content to allow his books and articles to speak for him. This same fusion of scholarship and action is the distinctive hallmark of our department, for virtually all of our members have, in their own lives, exhibited the same inseparability of theory and praxis.

Our doctoral program will seek to reproduce both the scholarship and the social commitment of Du Bois in a new generation of young scholar-activists who will carry into the 21st century the work that Du Bois did in the 19th and 20th centuries. Our dream, as we finally step down into retirement, is to see across this country dozens, if not hundreds, of well-trained scholars recreating our unique fusion of cross-disciplinary scholarship and social commitment in their own colleges and universities, and in the communities in which they live.

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