

Research Statement

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My research integrates Africana Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Modern European Philosophy in order to develop a model of modern freedom for a constitutional democracy that incorporates the historical experiences of marginalized social groups. My dissertation defends W.E.B. Du Bois's conception of modern freedom, advanced in his critique of late 19th and early 20th c. American society. I am currently revising my dissertation into a book, and am preparing to submit a précis for a book contract to Oxford University Press by Fall 2017. In presenting Du Bois's philosophy of freedom, the monograph departs from my dissertation by further exploring his debt to German philosophy, especially G.W.F. Hegel, J.G. Herder, and Max Weber's social philosophy. It also establishes his contribution to contemporary debates in analytic political philosophy about racial justice, which appeal to the principles of freedom and equality to address injustice, but cannot explain the historical emergence, and the current persistence, of racist practices that necessitate an account of racial justice in the first place. In neglecting the experiences of marginalized groups, political philosophers offer an abstract view of justice that is disconnected from the world. I assail this problem by establishing Du Bois as a resource for constructing a viable conception of racial justice in non-ideal conditions, an analysis that foregrounds the historical memory of slavery, emancipation, and Jim Crow.

My interpretative framework makes two key scholarly contributions. First, by stressing Du Bois's reliance on a normative theory of the state as formulated by Hegel, I address a common mischaracterization in the secondary literature on the normative basis of Du Bois's political critique. Rather than ascribe to him an elitist politics of racial 'uplift' and passive assimilation to Anglo-American folkways, I instead argue that his comments about 'uplift' amount to a defense of black political enfranchisement as free and equal citizens. Second, in demonstrating that Du Bois articulates a theory of racial justice in non-ideal conditions, I undermine the current consensus in contemporary political philosophy concerning the interpenetration of justice, history, and racial identity, as philosophers working within this field, particularly John Rawls, Axel Honneth, and Philip Pettit, have not met the challenge Du Bois presents to articulate how the historical memory of racial subordination impacts the norms of public reason.

The monograph proceeds in three sections. (1) I defend a racialist model of plurality, where racial identity conceptually anchors difference in democratic politics. Du Bois's racialist doctrine contributes to conceptualizing plurality in political liberalism in distinction from dominant accounts of plurality that do not focus on race. Margaret Gilbert and John Rawls highlight individuals' free choice in their views of social group formation. While accommodating the latter, Du Bois's racialism emphasizes the black historical experience as furnishing the normative salience of racial identity, which prefigures individuals' free choice. I also distinguish his racialism from notions of the *Volk* in German philosophy, where social identity is not articulated with the aim of reconstituting the norms of social cooperation in a civic community. I show that a racialist model of plurality exacts the civic obligation to confront the historical legacy of slavery and Jim Crow in democratic politics. (2) I advance Du Bois's view of the moral value of citizenship and the moral obligation of the modern American state to represent black interests from Reconstruction onwards. In drawing on Hegel's normative theory of the modern state, I justify Du Bois's observation that the Freedmen's Bureau –

established with the passage of the 1865 Radical Reconstruction Amendments – democratically facilitated a ‘social revolution’ by promoting the integration of freedmen on the moral basis of free and equal citizenship; and it incorporated black political will in the public adjudication of the common good – a historically unprecedented phenomenon. (3) I present the civic function of the black church and college with the rise of Jim Crow, when the U.S. federal government skirted its moral obligation to defend black interests. Inasmuch as these institutions groomed disenfranchised black citizens for the assumption of political power, I articulate the challenge they present to John Rawls, Axel Honneth, and Philip Pettit to chart the civic dimension of ‘private’ social institutions in their views of justice and freedom. Because Rawls, Honneth, and Pettit neglect to theorize the historical experience of racial subordination, they omit a formulation of social cooperation guided by the notion of the civic within the institutional context of civil society. Specifically, their delineation of the interrelation between citizens, social institutions, and the modern state fails to capture the flourishing of civic duty in the black church and college during Jim Crow. Thus, the monograph articulates Du Bois’s dynamic, institution-based account of freedom and justice in American modernity, which examines the role of racial identity in the political contestation of the legitimate scope and ends of the American civic community.

My future research will continue to explore the relation between the historical experience of marginalized social groups and the development of civic ideals in democratic politics. I will focus on two interpretive lines. First, I will prioritize an examination of the feminist dimension of Du Bois’s political critique. Although in some circles Du Bois has a reputation as a proponent of an antiquated model of gender relations, his account of black women’s labor in the church during Jim Crow highlights their role in cultivating habits of citizenship. He underscores that women’s care-work in grassroots community initiatives impelled a political praxis that preserved the dignity of black citizenship and encouraged a civic education for the assumption of political power, as black women lobbied for public policies supporting daycare, public housing, and public schools. Additionally, Du Bois’s assessment of the ethical significance of the black family contests a longstanding view among (white) feminist philosophers that exiting the family is a mark of women’s liberty. He instead shows that, historically, black women in the U.S. have had few opportunities to enter the family and manage their family affairs without interference. He thus argues that having the freedom to preserve familial bonds is a critical goal for black feminism. Second, I will explore how Du Bois’s political critique advances an account of non-alienated labor that challenges racist and sexist hierarchies in the labor market. He criticizes labor practices that confirm degrading stereotypes about intellect, talent, beauty, gender, and sexuality. These research foci have already resulted in a presentation at the North American Political Science Association and two drafts of journal articles that I plan to submit for publication in *Hypatia* and *Signs*. I also aim to present on Du Bois, the family, and gender relations at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) and PhiloSOPHIA.

My philosophical work privileges the experiences of marginalized social groups in formulating basic philosophical concepts such as freedom and justice. Such an approach encourages exploring the imbrication of racial justice, feminist philosophy, and political liberalism, while emphasizing a modern conception of freedom in fostering an inclusive civic community. The broader implications of my academic work reflect my conviction that philosophers have a responsibility to the public to illustrate the moral significance of respecting the perspectives of our fellow citizens and to clarify how duties of civility should guide our social interactions and political activities.