

The Transatlantic Origins of Double Consciousness: W.E.B. Du Bois in Germany

W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness is undoubtedly still relevant today. It is a valuable instrument when it comes to understanding and fighting social injustices. In his essay, Ellwood Wiggins asks where the concept originates. Referring back to [Gianna Zocco's essay about James Baldwin](#), he emphasizes the significance of self-knowledge in transatlantic encounters. He traces the resonances of Du Bois's double consciousness in Friedrich Schiller's essay »On Naive and Sentimental Poetry« (»Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung«) and suggests that they have important implications for contemporary society.

By Ellwood Wiggins

W.E.B. Du Bois and I have something in common. This claim is ridiculously hubristic and seems far-fetched: Du Bois was a Black New Englander who had immense international influence as a thinker, sociologist, and activist, while I am a white Southerner who works as an obscure literature teacher in the Pacific Northwest. But Du Bois and I both underwent transformative experiences as exchange students in Germany. In 1892, Du Bois received a government scholarship to attend the University of Berlin. Exactly one hundred years later, I spent my senior year of high school in Germany on the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange program. Both of us returned to America with a radically different perspective on our native country and ourselves.

Strategically curated self-knowledge is a staple of transatlantic encounters, as Gianna Zocco makes clear in [her blog contribution on James Baldwin](#). Like Du Bois, Baldwin was an African American who gained a new appreciation of his place in the world while abroad in Europe. In his 1955 essay, »Stranger in the Village,« Baldwin recounts his reception by curious inhabitants of a small town in German-speaking Switzerland, providing a fictional image of »European innocence« that serves as a tool to critique the unique insidiousness of American racism (Zocco, 2). Du Bois also paints a positive image of German racial attitudes in fin-de-siècle Berlin, but the result is much more affirming than Baldwin's.

The America that Du Bois left in the 1890s was approaching a nadir of racial injustice after the end of Reconstruction. Brutal lynchings of Blacks were on the rise, as Ida B. Wells courageously documented in the year of Du Bois's departure (*Southern Horrors*, 1892). The systematic disenfranchisement and segregation of Black Americans in Jim Crow Laws across the South were on their way to being legitimated by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1895. When he arrived in Europe, Du Bois was shocked to discover white people who treated him with respect. »...I met men and women as I had never met them before. Slowly they became, not white folks, but folks. The unity beneath all life clutched me« (Du Bois, 1968: 157). The common courtesy of being seen without open condescension led Du Bois to a richer and more hopeful vision of humanity. This experience simultaneously made him reevaluate his assumptions about his homeland: »In Germany in 1892, I found myself on the outside of the American

world, looking in« (ibid). He learned to see that American racism was not an inevitable condition of human nature, but a historically contingent and ultimately changeable phenomenon.

Intellectual Connections

The extent and precise lineage of German influence on Du Bois's ideas has been the subject of lively scholarly debate. Many have recognized his debts to the professors with whom he worked at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Du Bois himself penned vivid descriptions of their classroom antics (ibid: 162-66). Especially the sociologists Gustav von Schmoller and Adolph Wagner offered methodological models for Du Bois's groundbreaking ethnographic and sociological studies of the following decades (H. Beck, 1996: 57; Appiah, 2014: 25-44). Stephanie Smith shows how the structure of Du Bois's masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), invites detailed comparison with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (2013: 101-113). Kwame Anthony Appiah sees the cosmopolitan spirit of J.G. Herder fundamentally at work in the evolution of Du Bois's thinking on race and cultural difference. Appiah further identifies the influence of J.G. Fichte in Du Bois's valuation of striving (*Streben*), of Wilhelm Humboldt in his ideal of education (*Bildung*), and of Wilhelm Dilthey in his emphasis on psychological understanding (*Verstehen*) (2014: 45-82). Hamilton Beck, finally, traces the source of Du Bois's most far-reaching concept, double consciousness, back to Goethe's *Faust*. »The yearnings and interests that Du Bois took with him to Germany were given a framework, a vocabulary in Berlin that allowed him to understand himself better and be able to express himself in a new idiom, and part of this idiom came from Goethe« (1996: 59). All these German writers certainly made their mark on Du Bois's thinking, though the use to which he put them was uniquely progressive and entirely novel.

Surprisingly little has been written, however, about Du Bois's reception of another imposing figure of German literature: Friedrich Schiller. While taking German as an undergrad at Fisk University, Du Bois read Schiller's drama of Swiss liberty *Wilhelm Tell* (Beck, 1996: 46). Schiller is the only non-Anglophone European writer to rate one of the epitaphs to the fourteen chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk*. The haunting, sentimental tale of Josie and Du Bois's experience as an itinerant teacher in the American South, »Of the Meaning of Progress,« is preceded by a stanza from Schiller's tragedy about Joan of Arc, *The Maid of Orleans* (1903: 46). In fact, I will propose that, even more foundationally than any debt to Herder, Goethe, Fichte, or Hegel, Du Bois's double consciousness shares a basic structural similarity with Schiller's articulation of two modes of human psychology.

In 1795, after a dramatic rapprochement with Goethe, his former rival, Schiller published an expanded version of his attempt to compare the poetic sensibilities of the two new friends. The result was »On Naive and Sentimental Poetry,« which Thomas Mann would later dub the »most beautiful essay in the German language« (Pamuk, 2010: 14). Schiller divides poets, and by extension all people, into two basic types. Either they »are nature, or [they] search for nature. The former makes for the naive poet; the latter, the sentimental poet« (1795: 732). Clearly, Schiller is not working with the common usage of

these two terms in contemporary English. Like children, »naive« personalities are unselfconscious. They are at one with the natural world and their community. In contrast, »sentimental« persons are marked by difference: they are all too aware of their alienation from nature and their separation from communal cohesion. They yearn for a unity that nevertheless does not sacrifice their reflective consciousness, an infinitely unattainable goal that Schiller names with a third term, the »Ideal.« Only the sentimental are fully conscious of their condition and hence they alone can aspire to freedom and strive for true morality. The key division between the two modes is that of simplicity vs. doubleness: the naive's »pure unity of origin« and the sentimental's »doubled source« in reflection (1795: 739). The sentimental is quite literally a doubled consciousness of which the naive is blissfully unaware.

The parallels with Du Bois's theorization of being Black in a white world are hard to miss. But I am not insisting on a direct or intentional reference to Schiller's essay. Du Bois studied in Berlin at a time when Schiller's ideas—even if filtered through Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, and others—were everywhere: not just in the arts, but in sociology, anthropology, and political history. Instead, it is striking to think through Du Bois's claims about the color line in terms of Schiller's categories structurally. Whites are usually oblivious to the burden that their »natural« normalcy imposes on minorities: in this unconsciousness, they are naive. Blacks, however, *cannot* be unaware of their doubled identity: they enter the public sphere already with the sentimental mode of perception. They cannot revert to the carefree, unified existence *which whites don't even know they have the privilege to enjoy*. As Peter Szondi helpfully points out, the naive cannot know itself as such: the naive becomes an object of knowledge only with the advent of the sentimental (1973). Similarly, Black Americans clearly recognize the ease and security that their white compatriots have at their command. But unless whites take a lesson in alienation from persons of color, whiteness remains invisible to the white majority.

I could not help but think of Schiller while learning from Du Bois as I read *The Souls of Black Folk*. For me as a white American, coming to recognize the assumed and imposing normalcy of white culture was structurally similar to a naive person becoming aware of the (now suddenly lost) unity of nature. Blacks are always already in the position of the sentimental worldview. Wouldn't it be nice not always to have to think about being different? Wouldn't it be grand just to assume unconsciously that you'll be seen as a human like any other? But Black persons in American culture cannot escape their double consciousness. Nor should anyone who becomes aware of its injustice desire to return behind the »Veil« of ignorance, to use Du Bois's favorite—and decidedly Schillerian—metaphor.

In Schiller's schema, the sentimental condition means that African Americans and other minorities start off with a higher moral potential—and an accompanying burdensome struggle—that the majority whites lack. This innate ethical position resonates with Nikole Hannah-Jones's account of how Blacks have been the moral conscience of America, constantly confronting the nation with its failure to live up to the ideals of its founding (2019). Any progress toward those ideals over the centuries has been in response

to Black struggles and efforts. As Appiah notes, »One of the barely articulated themes of [Du Bois's] *Souls* is that the experience of Black people in the Americas, with all its horrors, may be part of what has prepared them for their contribution to the human task« (2014: 115). In Schiller's markedly Kantian view of morality, minority Americans ineluctably have the knowledge to act freely in accord with the moral law, if they choose to take up the challenge. Fortunately for the rest of us, people like Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, and James Baldwin have taken on the onerous task of teaching whites, too, to become aware of their unseen chains so that we might strive together toward the Ideal of natural but self-conscious justice.

Admittedly, there is no strict one-to-one correspondence between Schiller's and Du Bois's categories. For Schiller, there can be no »return« to the naive mode after the alienating emergence of self-consciousness. But it's too easy for whites like me to slip back into habits that belie a naive oblivion to our privilege, and nearly impossible for a Black person to do so, at least while inhabiting the dominant culture. Certainly no one would impute any special prodigy to the systemic advantage of majority whites, whereas Schiller limits true genius to the naive. But the comparison can be informative, even where the parallels break down.

Personal Connections

Ultimately it does not matter whether Du Bois ever read this particular essay by Schiller. The precise genealogical sources of Du Bois's intellectual heritage are secondary to the very real impact his ideas have had in the world. Kenneth Barkin, moreover, argues that whatever ideas Du Bois might have gleaned from professors and books in Germany, they were far less influential on his subsequent intellectual and personal development than his everyday experiences with German families and friends (2011: 4). A homestay with a family in Eisenach even led to a marriage proposal that was approved of by the girl's parents. Reflecting on this experience seventy years later, Du Bois wrote: »...I emerged from the extremes of my racial provincialism. I became more human« (1968: 160). This claim brings me back to my presumptuous assertion of a shared link with Du Bois.

When I arrived in Germany in 1992, I had never crossed the Mason-Dixon line or left the confines of the American South. Though I considered myself progressive, the pervasive monuments to the Confederacy that I grew up with—both in the physical landscape and in the memory culture of my family—seemed so normal and inevitable that I never really noticed them, much less objected to them. When I returned home a year later, I saw my Southern home with new eyes. I could no longer find it »cute« that whenever my grandfather would read yet another history of the Civil War, he would credulously hope that »this time« maybe Robert E. Lee would pursue his advantage at Gettysburg and pull off a Confederate victory. There was no single lesson or book that made me realize how abhorrent it was to valorize a criminal regime. Instead it was the everyday experience of being among people who refused to romanticize their defeat, who confronted and tried to atone—however inadequately—for their

society's former crimes. Of course, German efforts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) were then—and always will be—insufficient in the face of the Shoah. But living in a community for whom glorifying the past was unthinkable rendered the unthinking reverence for Confederate »heritage« impossible for me. Everyday life in modern Germany taught me to be conscious of the hurtful offensiveness of Southern nostalgia.

None of this is to say that either Wilhelmine or post-*Wende* Germany was a racially enlightened paradise. Du Bois himself remarks on the prevalence of German anti-Semitism, and a decade after he left Europe, Germans perpetrated the first genocide of the twentieth century against the Herero and Namaqua people in the colony of German Southwest Africa, in what today is the Republic of Namibia. The summer in which I arrived to live in former East Germany saw the worst post-war xenophobic riots in Rostock. Even in cosmopolitan Berlin today, minorities continue to be marginalized and discriminated against (L. Beck, 2019). Nevertheless, life in Germany allowed Du Bois to experience a kind of unself-conscious sociability among whites: a taste of the naive. The exchange year taught me, meanwhile, to be disconcerted with my own home culture: a push towards the sentimental.

Discomfiture alone is no redress for generations of chattel slavery and systemic racism, but it is an important first step. Living in a small, lily-white German town did not provide me with an education about race, nor should the crimes of the Confederacy and the Third Reich be conflated or equated. But the acquired unease with patriotism did draw me over the years to learn more about the victims of slavery and their descendants, and later to include these underheard voices in my own teaching. Life in Germany nudged me out of one kind of naivete, but it took many years of study and dialogue to become more conscious of the ongoing injustices in this country. This learning process is still ongoing—and will never end. Taken together, however, Du Bois and Schiller provide a framework for me to understand my own development, and to articulate my moral obligations to strive toward a more equitable society.

Leaving home in order to come to know oneself and returning different to a changed homeland is a staple narrative of Romanticism. Both Du Bois and I shaped our stories of self-recognition around this trope. As Appiah notes, »Du Bois was America's last romantic [...],« and his »arguments were tethered to the varieties of racial romanticism and postromantic thought that he took from Germany's intellectual traditions« (2014: 22). But regardless of the bookish explanations of his self-understanding, it was the lived experience of person-to-person transatlantic exchange that first made Du Bois feel—and me act—a little »more human«.

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