

# W.E.B. Du Bois and the Imagination of the Public Intellectual

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that a robust understanding of the definition, role, and value of the public intellectual ought to begin by contextualizing the history and meaning of the word “public.” A genealogy of the term, I posit, reveals that the idea of the “public” has been conceptualized in at least three major ways: as an “economy of attention”; as a denominator of the “common”; and as a signifier of the “political.” The upshot of such an understanding of the public is the manner in which it allows both for the plurality and diversity of public intellectualism, while at the same time offering resources for a rigorous critique of specific public intellectuals. Toward this end, I examine the work and practice of W.E.B. Du Bois as a public intellectual. I argue that Du Bois offers a particularly striking and exemplary illustration of the dialectic between publics and intellectuals.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Normative arguments about the vocation and value of public intellectuals often turn on implicit understandings of the meaning of the word “public.” But precisely because these accounts begin from a strong assumption that the “public” takes a singular form, they end up proffering a far too narrow conception of the types, forms, styles, politics, and ethics of public intellectualism. In what follows, I want to outline the many senses of the public toward the end of revealing the plurality and diversity in the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of public intellectualism. Such an account, however – precisely because it is attuned to the multidimensionality and pluricontextuality of the notion of the “public” – offers a more robust grounding for motivating a normative critique of public

intellectualism. Since it is alive to the protean forms of the public, it welcomes the diverse forms of public intellectualism. But because its critique takes a historical and textured account of the political, ethical, and aesthetic stakes articulated by particular “publics,” it has the resources for a comprehensive critique of both actually existing and modal embodiments of the public intellectual.

I shall draw on the work and life of W.E.B. Du Bois to illustrate the dialectic between publics and public intellectualism. Du Bois’s work offers a particularly fertile ground for thinking about public intellectualism not only because of the richness of his *oeuvre* but also because his intellectual work was deeply shaped by the many publics that he traversed and that he, in turn, shaped and influenced.

## II. FORMS AND FORMATIONS OF THE PUBLIC

In his influential book, *The Last Intellectuals*, Russell Jacoby defines the public intellectual as writers and thinkers who address a general and educated public.<sup>1</sup> Jacoby points to the likes of Mary McCarthy, Dwight Macdonald, Edmund Wilson, Lewis Mumford, and Lionel Trilling as paradigmatic American public intellectuals. He argues that the present age has witnessed the disappearance of such towering public intellectuals. Whereas what he considers to be “classic” public intellectuals lived as independent thinkers and conceived of their vocation as speaking in the vernacular to an educated public, contemporary intellectuals have become insular and complacent, corrupted by the emoluments of tenure and careerism.

Jacoby’s account of the definition and contours of the public largely follows its characterization by the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. In his groundbreaking book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas lays out an historical and

<sup>1</sup> Jacoby 1987: 5.

normative account of the rise of the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> According to Habermas, the public sphere emerged in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when a new capitalist class began to acquire economic control independent of the state. The bourgeois public sphere steadily gained enough power to act as a check on the excesses of the state. Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere was characterized by the suspension of status hierarchies; privileged rational-critical discourse; was tolerant to all manner of opinions; and was open, to a degree, to outside membership. For Habermas, the commitment of the bourgeois public sphere to dialogic discourse later came to be undermined by the colonization and takeover of public space by private corporate interests and the administrative state.

Jacoby's twist to the Habermasian tale, of course, has it that the public sphere was not simply seized by the state and the market, but that it was also abandoned by intellectuals who sought the comforts and securities of the campus cloister. Nonetheless, the critiques that have attended Habermas's work on the public sphere apply just as sharply to Jacoby's account. Like Habermas, Jacoby's account constructs the "public" as taking just one form. Moreover, in doing so, it ends up privileging a narrow – and dominant – populace as representative of this public sphere.

It is against the limitations of this Habermasian conception of the public sphere that a second account of public intellectualism has emerged. In an incisive critique of Habermas, Nancy Fraser pointed out that his historical account fails to account for what she memorably describes as "subaltern counterpublics." These counterpublics, she argues, are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."<sup>3</sup> The subaltern public intellectual's role – within this account – involves "broadening the conditions for the production of

<sup>2</sup> Habermas 1989: *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Fraser 1990: 67.

knowledge and the range of sites through which learning for self-determination can occur.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite its indubitable theoretical gains in comparison to the Habermasian public sphere, some critics have found fault with prominent theorizations of subaltern counterpublics. These critics argue that major accounts of subaltern counterpublics take for granted the givenness of publics. Instead, these scholars have articulated a conception of publics as “fictive” or “performative” or “rhetorical” – that is, that publics are discursively called into being. According to Michael Warner, “It seems that in order to address a public, one must forget or ignore the fictional nature of the entity one addresses. The idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental. It is constitutive of a social imaginary.”<sup>5</sup> The political theorist Corey Robin, largely motivated by a conception of the public as fictive, offers sweeping critique of contemporary public intellectuals in the United States. Robin’s charge is that these intellectuals take the notion of the public as a brute fact. Argues Robin:

The problem with our public intellectuals today has little to do with their style. It has little to do with their professional location, whether they write from the academy or for the little magazines. It has little to do with the suburbs, bohemia, or tenure. The problem with our public intellectuals today is that they are writing for readers who already exist, as they exist.<sup>6</sup>

If the idea of publics as fictive is particularly useful in drawing attention to the constructedness of publics, much of its theorization has been weakened by the idealist assumptions of its

<sup>4</sup> Henry A. Giroux, (1999): 18. For an example of a discussion of counterpublic intellectuals in South Africa, see Philile Masango (2009: 51).

<sup>5</sup> Warner 2002: 12.

<sup>6</sup> Robin (2016: <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Intellectuals-Create-a/234984>)

major proponents. In other words, major theorizations of the fictive public do not pay sufficient attention to the *embeddedness, entanglement, and embodiment* of publics in ecological, historical and social structures. By embeddedness, I mean to emphasize the particular historical, ecological, and social structures that allow for certain publics to emerge while making impossible other publics. Because persons are embedded, human agency is subject to the vicissitudes of power, chance, and luck that enable some discourses to gain uptake while rendering certain speech acts infelicitous. Moreover, precisely because of embeddedness, the temporal and spatial spans of “publics” are indeterminate. Certain publics have taken shape in the *longue duree* (patriarchal publics, for example) and thus, from their sheer sedimented gravity, are crushingly resistant to short-term rearticulation. Other publics flash into being, just as quickly fade away, but then centuries hence, their tantalizing echo barely perceptible in the air, mysteriously assemble formidable new publics into being. Additionally, publics are constituted by embodied persons who stand in a variety of complex, layered, imaginary, and entangled relationships with one another. None of these entangled relationships is reducible to a single category – publics are an entangled skein of intimates and non-intimates, strangers and relatives, friends and enemies, and cross-cutting intersections of class, gender, race, nationality, religion, disability, and so on.

Instead, however, of theorizing in light of these complexities, the emphasis by fictive theorists on how publics are formed by certain persons inflates the agency of those who hail a public into being – while discounting the welter of ecological, historical, and structural exigencies that both make possible and impossible the emergence of publics. Warner argues, for example, that “a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself”<sup>7</sup> – a statement that seems oblivious to history, social structure, and embodiment. Warner also argues that a public is a relation of strangers – and thereby proffers a reductive account

<sup>7</sup> Warner 2002: 67

of the tangled spectrum of relationships that constitutes publics. Corey Robin, for his part, speaks of the public intellectual in terms that conjure an image of a God-like figure, magical in his or her ability to bring a public into being.

In what follows, I want to draw from as well as depart from these accounts by proffering a typological sketch of various publics and how, in turn, they constitute as well as are constituted by public intellectuals. By emphasizing both the embeddedness of public intellectuals in deep histories and structures and their constitutive agency in articulating new ways of thinking and being, I aim to critique not only the idealist fantasy of public intellectuals as towering figures who electrify and dazzle a passive public with their ideas, but also its conservative obverse that either pines for a lost time of titanic public intellectuals or dismisses public intellectuals altogether as ineffectual, irrelevant, unrealistic, and the like. W.E.B. DuBois provides a particularly fitting exemplar of a public intellectual because of his acute awareness of the many publics that shaped his work and that, he in turn, also deeply contributed to and influenced.

## II. TYPOLOGIES OF THE PUBLIC

What forms does the “public” take? Below, I discuss three: the public as an economy of attention; the public as a space, action, or object that is held in “common”; and the public as a “political” space. By arguing that these are “forms,” I mean to emphasize that they are not mutually exclusive. They are deeply entangled.

### 1. Public as an economy of attention

The idea of the public as an *economy of attention* is an understanding of the public as a space in which attention is regulated or harnessed toward particular ends.<sup>8</sup> Most saliently, it refers to a space in which a person within a particular society feels entitled to draw attention to himself or herself, or to an activity or cause. For example, a public space, then, would be the sort of space in which a person can make

<sup>8</sup> Geuss 2000: 13.

demands on other people on a matter of concern. If, on the one hand, a public is the sort of space in which a person can call for certain forms of attention, its corollary is that it is also the sort of space in which people experience pressure to comport themselves in ways that do not draw attention to themselves. A public space, in other words, is the sort of space in which one interacts with non-intimates and therefore behaves in such a way that one minimizes attention to one's self.

The above understanding of the public has an acutely dialectical dimension. Since publics are not constituted only by speakers, writers, and actors but also by listeners, readers, and audiences, a notion of the public as an economy of attention also refers to the sort of space in which a person can refuse or reject certain forms of attention. For example, a quick glance is evaluated as permissible in a public space whereas prolonged attention to another person in a public space may be evaluated as "staring" and thus as an aggressive or even violent action.

An understanding of the public as an economy of attention explains the many paradoxical contestations over what it means to be "in public." If for some people, being in public precisely grants them the right to pay attention to strangers – for example, many teenagers often say they go to the mall to "people watch" – many others just as vociferously insist that being in public grants them the right of anonymity. These contestations give rise to a host of thorny debates: should someone have the right to take one's photograph if one is in a "public space"? Is Google Glass simply an extension of our right to capture our public surroundings or is it seen as an intrusive technology that violates a person's right to anonymity in public spaces? If someone writes on Facebook, or Twitter, or a weblog, does that constitute a public document? If someone sitting in a restaurant overhears a racist conversation at another table, should she respond or pretend she never heard it?

Such a conception of the public summons the public intellectual to particular kinds of responses. As persons embedded within social structures, public intellectuals – like others – are

subject to a host of demands for certain sorts of attention. In the current historical conjuncture – dominated by capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy – modes of attention are constituted and framed through spectacle.<sup>9</sup> Given their embeddedness in capitalist markets, public intellectuals are as subject as others within a polity to the logic of commodity fetishism and spectacle. Moreover, such is the cunning of capitalist that the very idea of the “public intellectual” itself becomes a commodity. It then follows that a robust normative account of public intellectualism has to come to terms with what it means to articulate ideas and thought in such an economy of attention. For the public intellectual, such an engagement begins with thinking through the meanings of attention and attentiveness.

## 2. Public as “common” denominator

Another prominent view holds that the public designates what is “common.” The meaning of the “common” is itself highly variegated and contested. It can refer to spaces that are believed either to belong to all or are believed to be openly accessible to all. In this sense, a public space is contrasted with spaces that are restricted or inaccessible to others. A related understanding of the public as common holds that it designates knowledges that are widely shared or believed. Seen thus, public knowledge contrasts with esoteric or arcane knowledges.

The idea of the public as “common” powerfully structures the public intellectual imaginary. On the one hand, the ascendance of democratic practices increasingly held schools in general – and knowledge in particular – as a right that all should have access to. But on the other hand, increased capitalist differentiation and its culmination in the ideology of professionalism, articulated a conception of knowledge as the possession of credentialed experts. These contestations have often played out as anxieties about the politics and ethics of public intellectualism. If one strain of that

<sup>9</sup> Debord 1994: 12.



anxiety has been dismissive of scholars who write for the public as vulgar popularizers, yet another equally powerful strain has excoriated scholars – tellingly, those in the humanities – for their hermetic and jargon-ridden prose.

### 3. Public as “political” denominator

The third dominant conception of the public designates it as a term that marks out spheres, ideas, persons, or properties that can be roughly described as “political” – that is, that have to do with matters concerning the governance or rule of a polity. Even here, there are complex and often contradictory understandings of the political. One understanding of the public holds that it refers to persons, spheres, or properties that belong to or are representative of a body of governance – such as a state. According to this understanding, a person is “public” if he or she represents the government of a polity. Alternatively, a “public” person or people may be one that that a state or government has a claim over. As Raymond Geuss helpfully notes, this may have been one of the dominant senses of public in ancient Rome. There is a reason why the term “*publica*” – part of the term *res publica* – bears a close relationship to the term *pubes* – the adjective for the pubic region – given that in ancient Rome, boys who had reached puberty were often of age to serve in the army.<sup>10</sup>

With the emergence and hegemony of liberalism during the European Enlightenment, of course, the term public came to designate not only a space controlled by the government, but also a sphere in which the government had the right to intervene. Liberal theorists such as John Stuart Mill drew a sharp binary between such public spaces with those of the private. The private space, so held liberal theorists, was the sort of space in which a person had the right to do whatever he or she wanted without government interference. The government, Mill famously held, could only intervene in such private spaces to prevent harm to others.

<sup>10</sup> Geuss 2000: 35.

Liberal theorists also articulated the notion of the “public” as spaces in which ideas concerning matters of governance could be debated.<sup>11</sup> From this emerged the notion of a public as persons who had a claim to determining the way they were governed. The views of such persons – concretized as “public opinion” – were seen by liberal theorists as critical indices of democratic legitimacy.

Those who have construed the public as a denominator of the “political” have argued for differing roles for the public intellectual. For champions of republican ideology, the public intellectual’s role consists in performing the civic role of articulating the common good. For liberal theorists, the role of the public intellectual consists in modeling inclusive, egalitarian, and rational discourse. Driven by these commitments, republican and liberal theorists have tended to be suspicious of radical democratic public intellectuals. For the republican, the radical democrat is not only lacking in patriotism, but is committed to what the republican disdains as particular interests on behalf of groups such as blacks, women, the poor, the disabled, and so on. The liberal, for his part, blanches at radical politics because it threatens the politics of civility, incrementalism, and moderation. Moreover, whereas the liberal insists that commercial interests should not overwhelm the public sphere, he still champions capitalism in what he believes to be its proper sphere – namely, the “economic.” In contrast, the radical proffers a root and branch opposition to capitalism.

In what follows, I consider Du Bois’s work as a public intellectual. I reflect on how he was both shaped by the publics that I have outlined above and the manner in which he also constituted these publics.

<sup>11</sup> Habermas 1989: 51.

### III. W.E.B. DU BOIS AS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

#### 1. Du Bois and the Public as an Economy of Attention:

W.E.B. Du Bois offers a particularly striking standard of the public intellectual precisely because of his deep understanding of the public as constituted through economies of attention. There is no stronger illustration of this than in his powerful book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Here, Du Bois frames his text as an excursion into a world invisible to the white world: “Leaving then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses, -- the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls. All this I have ended with a tale twice told but seldom written, and a chapter of song.”<sup>12</sup>

Behind the Veil, Du Bois famously goes on to argue, lives a people “gifted with a second sight”:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the 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.<sup>13</sup>

This passage is a rich demonstration of Du Bois's complex understanding of economies of attention. Even as he articulates a visual metaphor – a mainstay of North Atlantic philosophy – he complicates its ocularcentric resonances. Blacks, he states, are “born

<sup>12</sup> Du Bois 1989: xxxi.

<sup>13</sup> Du Bois 1989: 3.

with a veil” and, for precisely that reason, “gifted with a second sight.” Moreover, the vision of the American world – through which blacks are made to see themselves – yields no “true self-consciousness.”

Du Bois’s insight into the public as an economy of attention had been concentrated by a gruesome experience. In the fall of 1897, he joined the Atlanta University faculty and started directing the “Atlanta Conferences,” a research program designed to inquire into the conditions affecting black Americans. A pioneering thinker in the nascent discipline of historical sociology, Du Bois till then envisioned the discipline in largely positivist terms – “scientific” and “objective.” But two years after he arrived in Atlanta, his plans to conduct this research program were shattered with the horrific lynching of a black man named Sam Hose. In his memoir, *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois recounts this experience:

At the very time when my studies were most successful, there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored. I remember when it first, as it were, startled me to my feet: a poor Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord’s wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution* office, carrying in my pocket a letter of introduction to Joel Chandler Harris [journalist and author of the Uncle Remus stories]. I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking. I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work. I did not meet Joel Chandler Harris nor the editor of the *Constitution*.

Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing. . . .<sup>14</sup>

It is against this background of racist spectacle that Du Bois's work as a public intellectual fully emerges. His task, as his subsequent career bore out, consisted in a critique of an economy of attention that reveled in the terrorism of blacks. Against it, he unveiled a vision of full political, economic, and cultural equality for blacks.

## 2. W.E.B. Du Bois and the Public as Common

Perhaps in no other area does Du Bois evince more contradictions than on his views of the public as "common." These contradictions are dramatized in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. On the one hand, his view resonates with the elitist convictions of his time that a select cadre of exceptional blacks – a "talented tenth" – could lift poor blacks from poverty to prosperity. But on the other hand, he vigorously critiques the notion – then most prominently championed by Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute – that a liberal arts education was unsuitable for blacks. On this latter notion, Du Bois's argument is categorical:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.  
Across the color line I move arm in arm with  
Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and  
welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From  
out the caves of evening that swing between the  
strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars,  
I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul  
I will, and they come all graciously with no

<sup>14</sup> Du Bois 2007: 34.

scorn nor condescension. So, wed, with Truth,  
 I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge  
 us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long  
 to change into the dull red hideousness of  
 Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from  
 this high Pisgah, between Philistine and  
 Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?<sup>15</sup>

Du Bois would later go on to significantly modify his views on the notion of the “talented tenth.” As his sociological analytic increasingly drew on critiques of class and through his own bitter experiences with black elites, he revisited his views. His evolved views posited a mass of worker-intellectuals – an international coalition across the world – that would exercise revolutionary agency against an oppressive global capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Du Bois and the Public as Political

Du Bois’s engagement with the notion of the public as political was in large part articulated against liberal and republican political traditions. In the United States, the republican conception of the “public” had long constructed it as white and male. Moreover, republican theorists put forward a toxic American exceptionalism deeply contemptuous of not only blacks and women domestically, but also as justifying its conquest over other countries. Thomas Jefferson, for example, not only articulated a theory of white supremacy<sup>17</sup>, but also argued that women should be confined at home and had no place in the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> Against this, Du Bois not only articulated a robust argument for black participation in the public sphere, but also threw himself into vigorous activism for black rights. Moreover, against the narrowly nationalist

<sup>15</sup> Du Bois 1989:3.

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent discussion of Du Bois’s evolving views, see James (1997: 28).

<sup>17</sup> Jefferson 1984: 138.

<sup>18</sup> Jefferson 2006:159–60.

commitment of republicanism, Du Bois – nowhere more so than in his later years – proclaimed a robustly internationalist vision.

But Du Bois also offered relentless criticism of liberal conceptions of the public. As Melvin L. Rogers has astutely argued, it has not always been appreciated how much Du Bois’s immersion in rhetorical studies significantly shaped his political theory.<sup>19</sup> Du Bois received extensive rhetorical training as a student at Harvard University between 1888 and 1892. This training, Rogers argued, led him to conceive of the notion of “people” constitutively – that is, as discursively imagined or performed – rather than as a simple brute fact. Such a view cuts against a liberalism that conceives of the idea of the public as simply the aggregated opinions of a polity. From within this liberal view, opinions are relatively stable preferences that individuals express. Du Bois, however, pointed out that people did not simply possess particular preferences. Rather, preferences are shaped through democratic discourse.

### III. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argue that those who have put forward various conceptions of the ideal public intellectual often take for granted a certain vision of what the “public” is. Against this, I argue that a deeper engagement with the notion of “the public” reveals the plural, multidimensional forms of the concept. Such an account enables a far more historical and capacious understanding of public intellectualism than has been the case. Its immediate implication, it follows, is that we should be alert to the limitations of the normative theories advanced about the proper definition and role of public intellectuals. But even more importantly, it allows for forms of critique attuned to the manner in which public intellectuals are shaped by various publics and just as responsive to the ways they in turn shape their publics.

The work and life of W.E.B. Du Bois, I go on to argue, offers a particularly striking illustration of these arguments. Du Bois, I

<sup>19</sup> Rogers 2012: 188-203.

endeavored to show, articulated a conception of the public intellectual that deeply formed and shaped his imagination, but at the same time – over his lifetime – exercised a profound role in reconstituting those publics. If, as Du Bois presciently noted, the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line, it may yet be that his intellectual imagination offers a powerful response on how to engage with this legacy in the twenty-first century.



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