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# Black Praxis: The Trace of Jamesian Pragmatism in DuBoisian Scholar Activism

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# Black Praxis: The Trace of Jamesian Pragmatism in DuBoisian Scholar Activism

## **Abstract**

Philosophy and activism formed a mutualist relationship in regards to 20th-century Black American politics. Emancipatory theories undergirded the civil disobedience and reformist action of the entire century. W.E.B. DuBois, renowned African-American academic at the forefront of American and Pan-Africanist liberation movements, is often divorced from his originary philosophical roots. As he became the first Black PhD graduate of Harvard University, his mentor was philosopher and psychologist William James. James is the forefather of American Pragmatism, a school of thought still alive and dynamic in this day. DuBoisian scholars tend however to stress the German Idealist influences on DuBois's thought. Informed by protracted and ongoing theoretical and journalistic research, my project aims to locate the trace of Jamesian Pragmatism in DuBois's scholar activism. I argue that DuBois's struggles with Pragmatism engendered a way of thinking that resembles Marxist thought before DuBois ever went to Berlin. Further, DuBois's idealist revision of Jamesian logic informs his pre-NAACP activism with the Niagara Movement. All in all, my research shows how, despite his disagreements with his mentor, DuBois does not quite disavow pragmatism throughout this very political academic career.

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## **Keywords**

Pragmatism, DuBois, William James, Messianism

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | American Politics | Comparative Politics | History | Political History | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

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## Black Praxis: The Trace of Jamesian Pragmatism in DuBoisian Scholar Activism

Jerome Clarke

Springtime in Brussels, 1845. Karl Marx lays the groundwork for *The German Ideology* by interrogating the thought of Ludwig von Feuerbach, an anthropologist and atheist. Feuerbach's works take issue with religion and German Idealism and how they respectively alienate the human being from god and the idea of human history. Marx thought that even Feuerbach's theories alienated humans from human activity. Conceiving humanity was not the same as highlighting the very human activities that build and shape history. Marx, with this nuanced alienation in mind, concludes his *Theses on Feuerbach* with a new categorical imperative, a new ethic for philosophers. Marx wrote that "philosophers [thus far] have only *interpreted* the world...the point, however, is to *change* it."<sup>i</sup>

Fall, at Harvard College, 1888. W.E.B. Du Bois enrolls and studies for his second bachelor's degree. Harvard's graduate programs had not accepted Du Bois's first degree from Fisk, a historically Black university. As luck would have it, Du Bois meets the man who would change his academic trajectory, along with the rest of his life, Dr. William James. James, a psychologist who popularizes American Pragmatism, mentors Du Bois and influences him towards practical research. As Du Bois writes in his *Autobiography*, James "turned me back from the lovely but sterile land of philosophic speculation, to the social sciences as a field for gathering and interpreting that body of fact which would apply to my program for the Negro."<sup>ii</sup>

Du Bois wants his research to participate in the full liberation of Black people after the American Civil War. The country, with racism embedded into its social fabric, develops modes of segregation – political, economic, and social – as instruments of repression for Black Americans. James, as any good advisor, points Du Bois into the right academic direction.

Both Karl Marx and William James advocate for an intersection of theory and practice. Marxists, especially the Neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, name this intersection *praxis* – a Greek term for practice grounded in theory. Here, Marxists are indirectly honoring Aristotle, who in Book 9 of his *Metaphysics* described *praxis* as “[action] which includes the [goal].”<sup>iii</sup> *Praxis* has to include political aims.

Notably, Marx and James represent the social sciences: economics and psychology, respectively. Du Bois goes on to be a key sociologist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It’s important to note that the human sciences have not always been emancipatory – especially in the United States. According to philosopher Michel Foucault, human sciences lead to the subjugation of individuals in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Foucault notes that social science, by defining “normality” – in regards to “healthy” people and societies – create a new form of oppression: bio-power. Bio-power presents a scenario wherein oppressive systems subjugate individuals but individuals also subjugate themselves. A modern version of Plato’s Noble Lie.

Foucault argues that “the biological traits of a population become relevant factors for economic management, and it becomes necessary to organize around them an apparatus that will ensure not only their subjection but the constant increase of their utility.”<sup>iv</sup>

During the heyday of American chattel slavery, slave owners justified their racist economy with craniometry – relating human cranial measurements with intelligence. In *Crania Americana*, published in 1839, physical anthropologist Samuel George Morton presents the data of his cranial studies to claim a hierarchy of mental worth: white people over Native Americans over Black people.<sup>v</sup> Purportedly, the small cranial size of Black Americans imply their lack of intelligence and need for masters.

This is the discourse that Du Bois is dealing with; this is the discourse that he seeks to revise. He embeds his program for the social, cultural, and economic liberation of the Negro into his academic labor – just as Marx embeds the Communist Revolution into his works. In a sense, James influences Du Bois into becoming a proto-Critical Theorist: a philosopher with aims to critique and change society.<sup>vi</sup> Du Bois's sociology, in particular, has aims at changing the minds and ideas of the academy. Despite meeting his mentor during his undergraduate studies, Du Bois injects Pragmatist thought throughout the bulk of his scholar activism. Equally, 20<sup>th</sup>-century Black activism adapts ideas to the context of Black plight and culture. Hence, DuBoisian Pragmatism is qualitatively different than Jamesian Pragmatism.

One should first note that James merely revolutionizes an already-present idea.

Charles Sanders Peirce, James's contemporary at Harvard and a brilliant logician, conceives Pragmatism under a single maxim: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object."<sup>vii</sup> In other words, the meanings of ideas, ideologies, and so forth can be whittled down to their practical implications. We must, thereby, experience, witness, or properly envision concepts to understand their practical implications. Experimentation grounds Pragmatism as it does the scientific method.

James, on the other hand, psychologizes pragmatism and stresses the practical implications of believing something to be true. One of James's most famous arguments was a defense of transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is when bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ during the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist. James believes that there are "tremendous [psychological] effects" of believing the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Famously, James asserts that “nothing can be good or right except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right.”<sup>viii</sup>

As you can see, for James, truth and morality are located in psychological states: feelings, desires, etc. I believe it was Shakespeare’s Hamlet who said “Nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”<sup>ix</sup>

James argues that “[Pragmatism] has no *a priori* prejudices about theology. If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true...in the sense of being good for so much.”<sup>x</sup>

Du Bois’s work has a checkered view of religion which relates to his self-described agnosticism. Biographer David Levering Lewis notes that Du Bois’s “religious faith shriveled in the hot breath of hypocrisy and intolerance.”<sup>xi</sup> Unlike other Americans, including members of the clergy, Du Bois does not reconcile religion and American racism. In his most popular work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois expresses his contempt of religion as it relates to Black people:

This seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals [Negro and American], has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people,—has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.<sup>xii</sup>

According to Cornel West, *The Souls of Black Folk* marks Du Bois’s turn towards popular sociology and propaganda as a means for educating general audiences and creating social change outside academia.<sup>xiii</sup> This is an example of a pragmatic shift in Du Bois’s scholar activism. He thought the problem of American racism was stupidity, and thought that proving truth through social science would reverse that issue. He immediately realizes after his publishing of a well-regarded sociological study called *The Philadelphia Negro* that scholar activism solely within the

academy would not change the minds of the whole of America. Notably, the title of *Souls of Black Folk* alludes to religious concept of a person's immaterial essence. Du Bois blatantly employs religious language throughout the bulk of his non-sociological work. His bibliography is filled with the religious "Credo," *The Souls for Black Folk*, *Prayers for Black People*, and so on.

Jonathan S. Kahn, author of *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, points to how Du Bois's rich bibliography contains religious vocabulary and genres, such as sermons, jeremiads, biblical rhetoric, and prayers.<sup>xiv</sup>

Kahn writes that "[Du Bois's] uses of religion do not distract from the imperfect but focus attention ever more intently on the imperfect and on what exists in order to transform it into a worldly ideal."<sup>xv</sup> The sentimental diction available in religious expression is a pragmatic tool to reach American audiences at their immediate moral concerns. Despite his claims of irreligion, academics still debate Du Bois's faith, but it is important to note that religion plays a key part in the scholar's *praxis*.

To return to James, the thinker believes that the idea of good lies in diversity and plurality.

Cornel West makes clear that "James extends [Emersonian themes of contingency and revisability] to our personal and moral lives."<sup>xvi</sup> James's pragmatism has both an inherent holism and meliorism. One does the right thing by constantly engaging new material and being self-critical. No ideas are bad in a vacuum. One ought to be open to all ideas and see how they match up to other ideas. Whole institutions, including legislative and executive bodies of state, are subject to this same spirit of progress. With that said, ideals and politics are always up for debate. Du Bois does not accept this.

David Levering Lewis notes the originary split between Du Bois and James. While at Harvard, Du Bois completes an essay, it's called "The Renaissance of Ethics: A Critical Comparison of Scholastic and Modern Ethics," on which James wrote marginal notes.

Lewis writes that "the instructor was reconciled to making the best of things in a world of unprovable ultimates. The student was unwilling to concede the future to trial and error leading to everlasting trial and error – to, as James is quoted as saying in Du Bois's [thesis] notes, living 'under the sword of the future.'"<sup>xvii</sup> Du Bois is not willing to accept the ethical treadmill that James believes is *a priori* to the Pragmatic subject. Instead, I argue, Du Bois independently theorizes a kind of Marxist dialectical materialism.

Du Bois's thesis is that "ethical imperatives [arise] out of the interaction of mind and matter as both become transformed and purposive through willpower."<sup>xviii</sup> Du Bois's essay characterizes a rugged individualist who creates their ethics out of their natural and social conditions, monkish self-command, and self-transformation. Theorizing about self-mediation anticipates Du Bois's study at the University of Berlin wherein he definitely reads Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* - for his later opus, *The Souls of Black Folk*, address both self-mediation and a Hegelian yearning for self-consciousness.

Further, by centering matter as well as mind, Du Bois's thinking departs from James's psychological pragmatism.

Now, consider Kahn's suggestion that Du Bois seeks to create a worldly ideal and pair that concept with Du Bois's "Renaissance of Ethics." I argue that these two premises converge into a messianism, a moralism that saves the world and not by any degree an ethical treadmill. Du Bois sees himself as the savior of Black people. With that said, he was not the only savior of Black people.



In line with the Marxist allusions, Du Bois's messianism truly emerges as a vanguardism – especially in his philosophy. He conceives the idea of the Talented Tenth, Black Elite, who like Bodhisattva or the Platonically Enlightened, return to Black American communities to lift them up into academic, political, and economic salvation. Du Bois's Great Man Theory is most exemplified in the messianism attached to a figure like Martin Luther King, Jr – a worldwide symbol of peace and progress. Sixty years prior, in 1905, Du Bois creates the Niagara Movement – a group of moneyed Black thinkers who lobbied and petitioned for civil rights. This organization precedes the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP) of which Du Bois also founds. This organization is crucial throughout the entirety of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Black American activism and is very much a household name in the States.

Du Bois also seeks messianism in Black Art and Literature – a very much regarded patron of the Harlem Renaissance, an upsurge in arts in the 1920s. Finally, Du Bois modifies and broadens this concept to include Black people worldwide. He adopts Pan-Africanism, a school of thought with a headquarters in post-colonial Ghana. DuBois's messianic vanguardism predates Frantz Fanon's calls for national liberation by about half a century, and they were markedly similar. Until he dies, Du Bois's adapted pragmatism surfaces through his advocacy of Black art, Black politics, and Black nations.

Du Bois remodels Jamesian pragmatism into a beautiful radicalism. Du Bois was very much a moralist who sought to create a Heaven on Earth – wherein America unlearns its racism and finally lives up to its originary promises.

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- <sup>xv</sup> Kahn. p. 7
- <sup>xvi</sup> West. P. 55
- <sup>xvii</sup> Lewis. p. 95
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 95