

When rebellion becomes endemic in a substantial part of the society, it provides a potential for revolution, which reshapes both the normative and the social structure. It is this connection that a recent study of the changing role of the bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century France significantly extends the present theory of anomie. ❖

William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois (1868–1963) may be best known for his 1903 book, *Souls of Black Folk*, but this was not his only important work of social theory. Du Bois would live a long life of many political and literary involvements, all of them responding to crises of the twentieth century. It is possible that the finest of all his writings is a book written in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s. *Black Reconstruction* harkens back to the failure of the post-Civil War effort to reconstruct the South. Prior to Du Bois's book it was typical to blame the failure of Reconstruction in 1867 on the freed blacks. Du Bois, with characteristic restraint, dismisses such a ridiculous claim by a careful social structural analysis of economic and political tensions between black and white workers that were provoked by the white planter class. The argument is, in effect, not a question of failure so much as structured fates determined by larger political forces. Nowhere is the brilliance of Du Bois's structural sociology better illustrated than in the idea David Roediger has called the *racial wage*—the tacit accord whereby the white planters co-opted impoverished white workers to join their segregationist practices against black workers. In the post-Civil War period, the dominant class of whites regained their control of the American South by offering poor white workers the status of being white in compensation for their economic misery. The selection is from the conclusion to *Black Reconstruction*, a book of more than 700 pages.

Black Reconstruction and the Racial Wage

W. E. B. Du Bois (1935)

We see this more clearly today than the nation of 1868, or any of its leaders, could possibly envisage it; but even then, Northern industry knew that universal suffrage in the South, in the hands of Negroes just freed from slavery, and of white people still enslaved by poverty, could not stand against organized industry. They promptly calculated that the same method of controlling the labor vote would come in vogue in the South as they were already using in the North, and that the industry which used these methods must in the meantime cooperate with Northern industry; that it could not move the foundation stones upon which Northern industry was consolidating its power; that is, the tariff, the money system, the debt, and national in place of state control of industry. This would seem to be what the masters of exploitation were counting upon and it certainly came true in the bargain of 1876.

Thus by singular coincidence and for a moment, for the few years of an eternal second in a cycle of a thousand years, the orbits of two widely and utterly dissimilar economic systems coincided and the result was a revolution so vast and portentous that few minds ever fully conceived it; for the systems were these: first, that of a

Excerpt from *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 346–347, 700–702, and 706–708.

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democracy which should by universal suffrage establish a dictatorship of the proletariat ending in industrial democracy; and the other, a system by which a little knot of masterful men would so organize capitalism as to bring under their control the natural resources, wealth and industry of a vast and rich country and through that, of the world. For a second, for a pulse of time, these orbits crossed and coincided, but their central suns were a thousand light-years apart, even though the blind and ignorant fury of the South and the complacent Philistinism of the North saw them as one.

Reconstruction was an economic revolution on a mighty scale and with world-wide reverberation. Reconstruction was not simply a fight between the white and black races in the South or between master and ex-slave. It was much more subtle; it involved more than this. There have been repeated and continued attempts to paint this era as an interlude of petty politics or nightmare of race hate instead of viewing it slowly and broadly as a tremendous series of efforts to earn a living in new and untried ways, to achieve economic security and to restore fatal losses of capital and investment. It was a vast labor movement of ignorant, earnest, and bewildered black men whose faces had been ground in the mud by their three awful centuries of degradation and who now staggered forward blindly in blood and tears amid petty division, hate and hurt, and surrounded by every disaster of war and industrial upheaval. Reconstruction was a vast labor movement of ignorant, muddled and bewildered white men who had been disinherited of land and labor and fought a long battle with sheer subsistence, hanging on the edge of poverty, eating clay and chasing slaves and now lurching up to manhood. Reconstruction was the turn of white Northern migration southward to new and sudden economic opportunity which followed the disaster and dislocation of war, and an attempt to organize capital and labor on a new pattern and build a new economy. Finally Reconstruction was a desperate effort of a dislodged, maimed, impoverished and ruined oligarchy and monopoly to restore an anachronism in economic organization by force, fraud and slander, in defiance of law and order, and in the face of a great labor movement of white and black, and in bitter strife with a new capitalism and a new political framework.

All these contending and antagonistic groups spoke different and unknown tongues; to the Negro "Freedom" was God; to the poor white "Freedom" was nothing—he had more than he had use for; to the planter "Freedom" for the poor was laziness and for the rich, control of the poor worker; for the Northern business man "Freedom" was opportunity to get rich.

Yet, with interpretation, agreement was possible here; North and South agreed that laborers must produce profit; the poor white and the Negro wanted to get the profit arising from the laborers' toil and not to divide it with the employers and landowners. When Northern and Southern employers agreed that profit was most important and the method of getting it second, the path to understanding was clear. When white laborers were convinced that the degradation of Negro labor was more fundamental than the uplift of white labor, the end was in sight. . . .

The political success of the doctrine of racial separation, which overthrew Reconstruction by uniting the planter and the poor white, was far exceeded by its astonishing economic results. The theory of laboring class unity rests upon the assumption that laborers, despite internal jealousies, will unite because of their opposition to exploitation by the capitalists. According to this, even after a part of the

poor white laboring class became identified with the planters, and eventually displaced them, their interests would be diametrically opposed to those of the mass of white labor, and of course to those of the black laborers. This would throw white and black labor into one class, and precipitate a united fight for higher wage and better working conditions.

Most persons do not realize how far this failed to work in the South, and it failed to work because the theory of race was supplemented by a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest.

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.

On the other hand, in the same way, the Negro was subject to public insult; was afraid of mobs; was liable to the jibes of children and the unreasoning fears of white women; and was compelled almost continuously to submit to various badges of inferiority. The result of this was that the wages of both classes could be kept low, the whites fearing to be supplanted by Negro labor, the Negroes always being threatened by the substitution of white labor.

Mob violence and lynching were the inevitable result of the attitude of these two classes and for a time were a sort of permissible Roman holiday for the entertainment of vicious whites. One can see for these reasons why labor organizers and labor agitators made such small headway in the South. They were, for the most part, appealing to laborers who would rather have low wages upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage. White labor saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives, so that in many districts Negroes were afraid to build decent homes or dress well, or own carriages, bicycles or automobiles, because of possible retaliation on the part of the whites. . . .

The effect of caste on the moral integrity of the Negro race in America has thus been widely disastrous; servility and fawning, gross flattery of white folk and lying to appease and cajole them; failure to achieve dignity and self-respect and moral self-assertion, personal cowardliness and submission to insult and aggression; exaggerated and despicable humility; lack of faith of Negroes in themselves and in other Negroes and in all colored folk; inordinate admiration for the stigmata of success among white folk: wealth and arrogance, cunning dishonesty and assumptions of superiority; the exaltation of laziness and indifference as just as successful as the industry and striving which invites taxation and oppression; dull apathy and cynicism;

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faith in no future and the habit of moving and wandering in search of justice; a religion of prayer and submission to replace determination and effort.

These are not universal results or else the Negro long since would have dwindled and died in crime and disease. But they are so widespread as to bring inner conflict as baffling as the problems of inter-racial relations, and they hold back the moral grit and organized effort which are the only hope of survival.

On this and in spite of this comes an extraordinary record of accomplishment, a record so contradictory of what one might easily expect that many people and even the Negroes themselves are deceived by it. The real question is not so much what the Negro has done in spite of caste, as what he might have accomplished with reasonable encouragement. He has cut down his illiteracy more than two-thirds in fifty years, but with decent schools it ought to have been cut down 99 per cent. He has accumulated land and property, but has not been able to hold one-tenth of that which he has rightly earned. He has achieved success in many lines, as an inventor, scientist, scholar and writer. But most of his ability has been choked in chain-gangs and by open deliberate discrimination and conspiracies of silence. He has made a place for himself in literature and art, but the great depths of his artistic gifts have never yet been plumbed. And yet, for all that he has accomplished not only the nation but the South itself claims credit and actually points to it as proof of the wisdom or at least the innocuousness of organized suppression! . . .

If white and black in the South were free and intelligent there would be friendship and some intermarriage and there ought to be; but none would marry where he did not wish to, and there could be no greater intermingling in the future than in the shameful past, unless this union of races proved successful and attractive.

The revolution of 1876 was, in fine, a victory for which the South has every right to hang its head. After enslaving the Negro for two and one-half centuries, it turned on his emancipation to beat a beaten man, to trade in slaves, and to kill the defenseless; to break the spirit of the black man and humiliate him into hopelessness; to establish a new dictatorship of property in the South through the color line. It was a triumph of men who in their effort to replace equality with caste and to build inordinate wealth on a foundation of abject poverty have succeeded in killing democracy, art and religion.

And yet, despite this, and despite the long step backward toward slavery that black folk have been pushed, they have made withal a brave and fine fight; a fight against ridicule and monstrous caricature, against every refinement of cruelty and gross insult, against starvation, disease and murder in every form. It has left in their soul its scars, its deep scars; but when all is said, through it all has gone a thread of brave and splendid friendship from those few and rare men and women of white skins, North and South, who have dared to know and help and love black folk. ❖