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# Du Bois and the Boys' Club of the 'Great Books'

by  
Bill Farrell

*A shorter version of the following article first appeared in the September 11–17, 1991, issue of In These Times.*

During the autumn of 1990 the Encyclopedia Britannica published the *Great Books of the Western World*, its selection of Western civilization's sixty best works. Newspapers respectfully reported the event. Commentators acclaimed the set's affirmation of Western culture. A scholarly symposium at the Library of Congress celebrated the collection's publication. The National Press Club, usually concerned with major politicians and famous journalists, invited Mortimer Adler, the series editor in chief, to address it.

In his interviews and public appearances connected with the publication of the series, Adler stressed that to be a great book a work must discuss a large number of the "great ideas." But Adler's—and presumably the Britannica editorial board's—criteria present some problems.

First, Adler's approach shares an unfortunate flaw common to other canon manufacturers, one that even some conservative academics have bemoaned: It frequently excludes great works of history. A great work of history often does not discuss great ideas as such, even though its analysis may well incorporate important concepts while examining serious topics. Despite serious theoretical disputes regarding the nature of a "fact," history is limited by what actually happened. As a result, empirical data can disrupt a rigorous theoretical approach and new evidence can overturn a historian's most famous philosophical discussion.

Beyond the problems specifically limited to history, Adler's "great books" definition denies that any book discussing just one great idea can be a great book—even though that book's treatment of the concept might be the most brilliant, subtle, and insightful ever published.

## Color Blinders

Amid the triumphal hoopla, a few critical voices pointed out that the series contained no books by

authors of color. Some suggested that the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois should have been included. (C. L. R. James arguably also merited inclusion.) In response, Adler said that no black American had written a great book. Specifically addressing Du Bois's exclusion, Adler argued that Du Bois's best book was his autobiography, which simply failed to meet the criteria for inclusion in the series.

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Adler's argument reveals almost total ignorance of Du Bois's work. Adler's failure to distinguish among Du Bois's autobiographies also suggests that he is unaware that Du Bois wrote more than one. Furthermore, a number of Du Bois's books are more important than any of his autobiographies. Among these are *Black Reconstruction*, a pioneering work in American history examining the Civil War and Reconstruction; *The Souls of Black Folk*, a serious examination of the issues of race and color; *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, and *The Philadelphia Negro*, an important work in American sociology.

During his appearance at the National Press Club, Adler explained that a "good book" discusses, elaborates upon, or adds to the understanding of at least one great idea. Attempting to distance himself from racial controversy, Adler read the names of the black authors listed in the *Syntopicon*, all of whom, in Adler's words, had written good books. Ironically, in relying on the *Synopticon*—one of Adler's proudest achievements—Adler provided further evidence that he knows nothing about Du Bois. Adler, like the *Syntopicon*, never mentioned Du Bois. (The *Syntopicon* is an index to the great ideas as they appear in both great and good books. Adler originally wrote the *Syntopicon*, or at least supervised its writing, to guarantee that those purchasing the Britannica series would actually read the books.) Yet, some of Du Bois's work must have dealt with at least one great idea.

## Reconstructing History

For example, in *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois examined such topics as slavery, freedom, abolition, the nature of property in a slave society, whether it is necessary to own property to be free, the nature of democracy, the function of land in an agricultural society, the nature and methodology of history, the roles of various classes, and the role of race in

American society. Certainly some of these constitute great ideas. Many of these ideas have interested such diverse thinkers as Aristotle, Rousseau, Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx. Furthermore, though *Black Reconstruction* was ignored when it was first published in 1935—largely due to the racism of the intellectual establishment—the questions it raised have largely dominated most examinations of Reconstruction from the early 1960s to the present.

In fact, partially in recognition of *Black Reconstruction*'s importance and insights, the leading historian of Reconstruction, Eric Foner, dedicated his book *Nothing but Freedom* to the memory of Du Bois, using his introduction to pay tribute to the insights of *Black Reconstruction*.

Similarly, in *The World and Africa*, published in 1947, Du Bois again presaged the interests and efforts of the current generation of historians by exploring both the role of Africans as participants, not merely bystanders, in history and Africa's place in the world as an integral element in world history. The rethinking of world history that Du Bois proposed in *The World and Africa* draws upon and affects substantial issues in both the methodology and philosophy of history. Simply put, the categorization of history is either a great idea or involves a number of them. (For example, Hegel devoted some of his most important work to the conceptualization or categorization of history.) Because important historians and anthropologists now are exploring concepts and analyses that Du Bois's work suggested, it cannot be argued that Du Bois's discussion of these great ideas does not merit attention.

In view of Du Bois's substantial body of work, listing all the great ideas in his various works would quickly become tedious. Yet, the significance of *The Philadelphia Negro* in American sociology merits such discussion.

While studying at the University of Berlin between 1892–94, Du Bois attended various seminars and heard the lectures of visiting professor Max Weber, learning the sociological approaches and

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concepts then being developed in Europe. Later, Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* became one of the first efforts to apply the European concepts and analyses to an American context and for an American audience.

When *The Philadelphia Negro* was first published in 1899, sociology was still largely unestablished as a discipline in America. Many of today's great univer-

sity sociology departments had yet to be founded. In such circumstances, Du Bois easily could have decided to write about these ideas only in an expository work. Instead, by applying these concepts to his study of the Philadelphia black community, Du Bois furthered both the discussion and development of these ideas while presenting his own original insights.

In view of all this, Adler and company's failure to recognize Du Bois or at least realize the value of his books beyond that of his autobiographies is puzzling. It might be argued that an appreciation of Du Bois is a relatively new intellectual trend, hence the canon will need a generation to catch up. But Max Weber—arguably the greatest sociologist in that discipline's history, the patron saint of non-Marxist sociology—recognized Du Bois's gifts relatively early in Du Bois's career, when Weber invited Du Bois to contribute to the journal that Weber edited, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, which later published a Du Bois article in 1906. Indeed, in a 1905 letter Weber enthusiastically urged a German translation of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, which he called a "splendid work."<sup>1</sup> In fact, Weber offered to write the introduction, even suggesting a translator.

### Try a Little Trendiness

Because important intellectuals and institutions acknowledged the value of Du Bois's work long before the appearance of either Adler's *Syntopicon* or the most recent appearance of Encyclopedia Britannica's great books series, the exclusion of Du Bois cannot be explained merely by the resistance of Adler and colleagues to recent intellectual trends. Instead, an examination of Adler's credentials as a philosopher and his role as a cultural bureaucrat provides a basis for understanding Adler's dismissal of Du Bois.

Adler's intellectual and scholarly qualification as a judge of great and good books is his background as a philosopher. Certainly, philosophy has a strong claim that it is Western culture's oldest intellectual discipline. Many independent academic fields and scientific disciplines originated as branches of philosophy.

But Adler's philosophical credentials are not terribly impressive. He has produced no significant original philosophic work. He is no great thinker, only a populizer, and has in fact been highly critical of many contemporary philosophers whom he has attacked as being too technical and specialized.

The best scientist is not the one who knows all the references and reads all the journals but makes no original contributions to science. Similarly, the best philosopher is not a mere bibliographer but a thinker whose work advances the development of philosophy.

Being an unoriginal philosopher hardly seems an impressive credential. Yet, it is a condition that Adler shares with other prominent advocates of various great books curricula, such as Allan Bloom and former Secretary of Education William Bennett.

By publicly promoting various versions of the great books, Adler and his spiritual compatriots effectively have diverted attention from their own lack of intellectual accomplishment, while obtaining both a platform for their views and a prestige that they could never obtain on the basis of their work alone. Perhaps in the future, following Adler's example, those incapable of understanding modern mathematics should attack contemporary physics for relying so heavily on calculus and other mathematical fields. Such mathematical incompetents could be given responsibility for awarding both scientific grants and the Nobel Prize in physics. Eventually, they might come to shine in the glow of the fields they presumed to judge, being seen as great physicists in the same way that Adler has become an "authority" on philosophy, literature, and a number of other fields.

Adler's attack on original philosophic thought parallels his more general resistance to knowledge contrary to his own preconceptions. In 1987, Martin Bernal published *Black Athena*, a significant work advancing controversial claims, including Bernal's views that ancient Egyptian civilization was at least partially black. Conversely, mainstream Egyptology maintains both that the ancient Egyptians did not recognize race as such and that ancient Egypt was neither white nor black, but a mixture of the two. This scholarship is neither obscure nor known only to specialists.

Despite this, Adler — as Eric Alterman quotes him in the November 19, 1990, issue of *The Nation* — continues to claim "there was nothing in Africa except Egypt and Egypt was white not black." Thus, both mainstream Egyptological scholarship and Bernal's work, which strongly oppose each other, deny Adler's claim that Egypt was white. If Adler was unaware of mainstream Egyptology's view (let alone Bernal's), then he apparently feels free to pronounce upon fields about which he is completely ignorant, proving that his dismissal of Du Bois was no aberration. If Adler knew of this scholarship, then he either decided to ignore work that did not fit his own narrow preconceptions or deemed himself competent to dismiss serious scholarship in a field in which he had done no work and has no qualifications.

To put it bluntly, Adler has no importance as a scholar, as his lack of scholarly accomplishment makes clear. Adler's only importance derives from his position as a cultural bureaucrat. Through his positions and relationships with various publishers

and editors, Adler can further the publication and job prospects of favored students, scholars, writers, and others, while promoting his own agenda. His position as a judge of the great books is due not to merit, but merely to his position as the Encyclopedia Britannica's series editor in chief.

Adler's criticism of books he has not read, including Du Bois's work, is typical of a cultural bureaucrat. Simply put, cultural bureaucrats do not need to read the books they criticize in order to perform their functions, which resemble those of the "expert" in Henry Kissinger's definition: the "expert has his constituency — those who have a vested interest in commonly held opinions: elaborating and defining its consensus at a high level has, after all, made him an expert."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the early academic recognition of Du Bois, his work rarely appeared on the assigned reading lists in American universities for several reasons. First, Du Bois was black. Second, much of his work, such as *Black Reconstruction*, challenged the racist mythology used to justify segregation. Third, during his lifetime, Du Bois moved steadily to the left politically, finally joining the Communist Party in the early 1960s, making him politically unacceptable. Fourth, for most of his career, Du Bois was not an academic.

Believing themselves to have read or at least to know the names of all (or most of) the authors of the great books, academics on book selection committees were (and remain) predisposed to reject any suggestion either that Du Bois was a great thinker or that he produced important books. Adler's own prejudices conformed to those of his audience. And even if Adler privately disagreed with his constituency's prejudices, he would not likely express his disagreement. Given Adler's scholarly shortcomings, if he lost his prestige as a cultural bureaucrat, he could not regain that prestige on the basis of his scholarship.

For these and other reasons, various versions of the canon — particularly Adler's set of the great books — have been both used and promoted by Adler and company to further an essentially anti-intellectual agenda. In the hands of Adler and his spiritual allies, the great books have become the last refuge of the third rate.

Bill Farrell is a writer and attorney living in the New York City area.

## Notes

1. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume I, Selections 1877-1934* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 106-107.

2. Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), 188, quoting Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (Norton, 1969), 28.