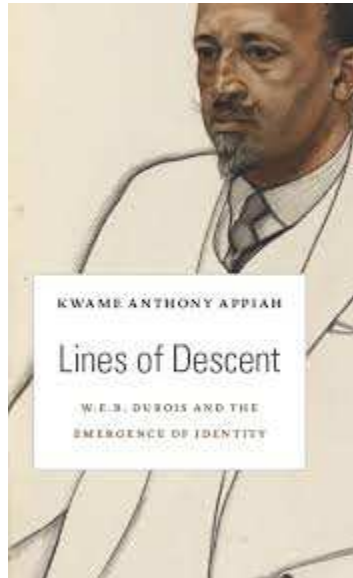




Lines of Descent, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity

Kwame Anthony Appiah

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Reviewed by Camilla Fascina¹

“Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, and one desires to break off from the other.”

As Appiah underlines, this Faustian statement perfectly epitomizes Du Bois's everlasting feeling of carrying two warring ideals in one dark body: being an American and being black.

Lines of Descent, W.E.B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity by Kwame Anthony Appiah is an analysis of these two divergent loyalties, Du Bois's love for his oppressed race and his oppressing country, which resulted in a breakup that characterized his whole life and thought.

In order to carry out an analysis of Du Bois's life-long struggle, Appiah draws back to Du Bois's years at the University of Berlin. There Du Bois found an intellectual milieu essential to foster his attempt to redefine the concept of race. After his studies at Harvard under the tutelage of Albert Bushnell Hart, one of the founders of modern historical studies in the United States, and after receiving a Harvard MA in history, Du Bois was determined to seek “more light!” (Appiah 3). So he decided to train at the University of Berlin where he could find several of the most important intellectual figures of the era.

It is no coincidence that philosophy scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, also author of the prize-winning volume *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (Issues of Our Time)*, directs his gaze towards Du Bois. In *Lines of Descent* Appiah brings forth Du Bois's synthesis of the relationship between individual and group identity, a common concern shared by both Du Bois and Appiah. Furthermore, the relevance of the present volume lies in the fact that Appiah focuses on the importance of European romantic notions of race, culture, and nation for Du Bois's formulation of the concept of race and of racial identity.

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Chapter one, titled “Awakening,” begins with Du Bois's departure for Germany in 1892. In this chapter, Appiah outlines the intellectual ferment Du Bois found in Berlin and traces the doctrines and the scientific disputes that influenced Du Bois's research. Relevant to Du Bois's future career was the fact that all the academics he met in Berlin also had a political career. Gustav von Schmoller, for instance, had served in the Prussian Council of State. Schmoller believed that the scholar's role was to make observations in order to infer historical patterns that could help guide policy makers. Appiah points out that, thanks to Schmoller, Du Bois approached the historical school's vision of the union between scientific knowledge of socio-economic history and political engagement. In addition, Schmoller saw class struggle as the result of class domination; in his book *Die Soziale Frage* (regarding the central concern of the historical economist, i.e. the social question), Schmoller states that class conflict can be amplified when class difference and race difference coexist. As Appiah underlines, it was evident to Du Bois that the social and the Negro² questions had many points of affinity. Furthermore, of crucial importance for Du Bois was the fact that Schmoller presented these claims as discoveries of historical analysis, not as deductions from a picture of human nature. If Schmoller theories led Du Bois to approach the Negro problem scientifically, another important encounter allowed Du Bois to enter a conceptual world which influenced his writings and thought from then on.

In chapter two, titled “Culture and Cosmopolitanism,” Appiah focuses on Du Bois's discovery of the conceptual world of Johann Gottfried Herder, the great German philosopher of Romanticism. What stroke Du Bois's attention was Herder's picture of the spiritual life of the nation, i.e. the belief that each nation had its peculiar governing spirit, or *Volkgeist*, which is expressed in every aspect of its social and cultural life - like folklore, for instance. For Herder, as for Du Bois, the distinctiveness of each nation did not have to undermine the idea that all human beings are fellow citizens of the world. The conviction that cosmopolitanism and nationalism could coexist informed much of the nineteenth-century liberal thought as well: Burke and Mazzini, for example, stated that the devotion to one's country represented the first step towards the progress of humanity. With this frame in mind, Appiah stresses the fact that, even though it might sound like an oxymoron, Du Bois was indeed a cosmopolitan nationalist. According to Du Bois, the race idea is the most ingenious invention for human progress, hence his purpose to locate his black identity within the larger frame of humanity seen as a vast family where no race distinction exists. However, Du Bois knew that a cosmopolitan view together with the theory of the spiritual life of nations could not solve the problem of the “color line,” as Du Bois calls it in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The plague of the twentieth century, Du Bois declares, lies in the fact that the color of the skin is made the basis for denying to a vast majority of the population the right to share the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.

In chapter three, “The Concept of the Negro,” Appiah presents Du Bois's attempt at overcoming the problem of the color line by redefining the meaning of race.

Could black people be considered as a race? What did Du Bois have in common with people in Africa? Could a biological account provide an explanation for the unity of black people? Appiah gives a vast overview of the scholars that most influenced Du Bois's quest for the race concept and he highlights how, after studying Dilthey, Lotze, Boas and Ratzel, he discovered and embraced the theory of the biology of heritable characteristics elaborated by Sir Julian Huxley in *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*.

According to this synthesis between Mendelian genetics and Darwinian evolutionary theory, there is no necessary connection between bodily phenotype and mental capacity. The consequent conclusion is that there is no longer reason to take racial groupings seriously. As a matter of fact, biologically speaking it might be said that sometimes the properties that the members of a supposed “race” share are only the superficial phenotypic ones that we use in social life to assign people to racial categories. But this is not the case when interbreeding occurs; it may happen, in fact, that some members of a racial group share physical characteristics with members of other racial groups. This is further evidence that there are no races in the sense of separate and pure breeds of humans, differing in capacities. Thus a scientific proof of the existence of different “races” is impossible.

² From this moment on, when reporting the term Negro I am referring to its use in Du Bois's works and thought.



As a result it is evident that physical characteristics are not so inherited as to make it possible to divide the world into races; however, as Appiah notes, Du Bois understood that the western race concept was so deeply rooted in the global consciousness that it was far from being eradicated by a purely scientific-biological explanation.

Despite this, Du Bois was convinced that there must be something that the members of a group share. If the phenotypic features were of trivial importance, culture might be the factor the members of a group could have in common.

He thus formulated the hypothesis that the way a generation is shaped by the previous one is through cultural transmission, a mechanism which operates through language and public behavior. Culture, and not phenotypic characteristics, can be the source of group identity.

In this new light, Du Bois articulates the idea of race as an effect of social practices, a social construction, a pretext whereby the minority of the global population puts the majority into slavery.

Therefore, Appiah draws the attention to another problem that emerges in Du Bois's research: how to dismantle the notion of blackness as a badge of discrimination and how to go beyond the equation "negro equals a history of suffering." Here, Appiah stresses Du Bois's attempt to overcome the tragic view of blackness as an unfortunate necessity by trying to reveal the almost ignored history of what had come before that suffering.

In chapter four, titled "The Mystic Spell," Appiah uncovers Du Bois's lack of a deep knowledge of the history of Africa. Despite holding a Harvard PhD on the history of African slave trade, Du Bois admitted he had no knowledge of Africa's past history. Hence, believing that Africa could be the source for the definition of "the Negro soul" (Appiah 59), Du Bois approached his racial identity as a form of nationalism and decided to explore the history of Africa. From this study he inferred once again that in Africa, like in any other continent, there is no absolute racial type since human groups continually mingle with each other. Du Bois claims, once again, that the notion of race has no right to exist at all, and that the idea of the inferiority of black people is only an American concept.

In chapter five, "The One and the Many," Appiah accounts for Du Bois's crisis after returning from Africa. He went there with the purpose of reconstructing his black identity, but he ended up stating that Africa could not provide a common matrix in order to define the identity of the Negro. He returned to think of the badge of slavery as what tied him not only to his ancestors, but also to the black people that had suffered discrimination in all parts of the world, not only within the borders of Africa.

However, in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) Du Bois admits that a description for the race concept continues to fail. Here, Du Bois finds support in Josiah Royce's definition of "community of memory". Thanks to this theory, Appiah reveals Du Bois's final urge to see black people as a vast family whose members recognize, accept and share as a part of their individual life a common memory constituted by the same past events. Furthermore, in Roycean terms, "each of its member accepts, as a part of his own individual life and self, the same expected future events that each of his fellows accepts." Du Bois realizes, however, that this final formulation has no theoretical support. Resigned to the idea that oppression continued to define identity, that color remained an index of injustice and that racial inequality would not be lessened within his lifetime, Du Bois leaves a final message to future black generations before his death in 1963. In "Last Message to the World" (Appiah 164) he passes on to them his life-long task of defining and dismantling the race concept, hoping that the goal of freeing his people from the heritage of slavery will be completed by the future generations. Appiah concludes his book by reporting Josiah Royce's words: "loyalty to lost causes is one of the most potent influences of human history;" such a hope proved to have at least a real basis when, forty-five years after Du Bois's message to the future generations, a black man became President of the United States.