W.E.B. Du Bois and the urban political economy tradition in geography

Jason Hackworth
Department of Geography
University of Toronto
100 St. George Street, Rm 5047
Toronto, ON, Canada, M5S 3G3
jason.hackworth@utoronto.ca

Abstract:

W.E.B. Du Bois’ considerable contributions were actively diminished during his life and remain marginal in geography. This is unfortunate for urban geography, particularly its political economy wing, because his empirical and theoretical work offer a potentially internal critique of modern debates in the field. This review essay attempts to initiate a wider dialogue about the potential value of Du Bois to the influential urban political economy paradigm in geography. Specifically, I adapt and apply Du Boisian definitions of racism to two literatures: the rise of neoliberalism; and the significance of gentrification in Black spaces.

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Introduction

William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois, born in 1868 in Massachusetts, made extraordinary scholarly and activist contributions during his 95 years of life. His celebrated works include *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935a). He was first Black person to receive a PhD from Harvard, and was a talented activist—one of the co-founding members of both the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He made seminal contributions to history, economics, and sociology, among other fields. He is one of the most important figures in the Black radical tradition, yet despite the breadth and depth of this contribution, his work was actively marginalized during his life, and its importance downplayed until very recently (Morris, 2015). There is a recent, ongoing effort to elevate his work in sociology (among others see, Wright, 2016; Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020), but his work does not even enjoy this belated affirmation in the other social sciences. It would be incorrect to suggest that his work is entirely absent in geography. Bobby Wilson’s (2002; 2005; 2012) sustained engagement with Du Boisian political economy, and Anna Livia Brand’s (2018) more recent analysis of Du Bois’ “double consciousness” stand out in this regard. But it would also be an overstatement to suggest that his work is foundational to the field. The critical dialogue with other influential non-geographers such as Lefebvre, Foucault, Gramsci, Hall and Bourdieu, has been far deeper and more sustained than geographic engagement with Du Bois. This is unfortunate, as the ideas of Du Bois offer synergies and divergences with modern debates in the field that could provide new horizons. This is particularly the case with urban geography.

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2 I would like to thank Prentiss Dantzler, Mark Hunter, Joshua Inwood, Rachel Silvey, and Earl Wright for reading an earlier draft of this manuscript and offering helpful comments.
This review essay is motivated by the following question: how would a Du Boisian perspective alter or challenge contemporary debates in urban geography? There are at least four reasons why such a conversation is needed. First, Du Bois was, in many ways, a practitioner of urban geography. He published detailed empirical work on Philadelphia and Atlanta, and included extensive passages in his writing about places as varied East Saint Louis and New York City. These writings are almost invisible within urban geography. If nothing else, they form an important, untapped historical benchmark of these places, using methods that modern urban geographers would find familiar. Second, urban geography has been influenced by the Marxian tradition as much as any sub-field. The Marxian-inspired works of David Harvey, Allen Scott, Neil Smith, and Doreen Massey, among others, are now classics in the field. Du Bois was a Marxist, but not a dogmatic one (Wilson, 2002; Roediger, 2019). He engaged with formal Communist organizations and debates during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, and was eventually prosecuted by the U.S. Government for these ties, but his sacrifice and loyalty were generally not reciprocated within the Marxian community. He was considered a bit of a heretic in part for challenging mainstream Marxian conceptions of race and colonialism (Robinson, 1983; Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020). Given the longstanding challenges that some corners of the Marxian community have had with understanding non-class based forms of difference and domination, his work was then, and could be now, made more central to debates within urban political economy. Unlike other challenges to the Marxian paradigm, moreover, a Du Boisian perspective is more internal, and thus potentially more valuable at advancing the political economy angle in subtle ways. Third, recent work in human geography has emphasized the importance of Black geographies. There is no singular canon to Black geographies but there are

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3 Du Bois was prosecuted under the McCarthy purges in the early 1950s, ostensibly for his anti-nuclear proliferation activism. The U.S. Government confiscated his passport for almost 10 years.
several shared recognitions (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019). These include the fact that geography has historically elided voices of Black scholars (Hawthorne and Heitz, 2018), has not adequately emphasized the place-making agency of Black people (McKittrick, 2006; Allen et al., 2019; Hawthorne, 2019), and that geography’s Marxian wing has not always adequately theorized the role of racism in the construction and reproduction of capitalism (Wilson, 2002: 33-34; Roediger, 2019). But while such considerations may be relatively new to geography, they are not to other fields, namely the Black radical tradition. Figures like Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and Franz Fanon have been making such arguments since the late nineteenth century with careful attention to the history and institutions of the United States, France, and Haiti among other geographic applications. Having a better understanding of such scholars can shed better light on what contemporary perspectives are actually unique, and which are derivative, or related to theories already constructed. Fourth, the political events of the past calendar year have provoked a wider conversation about the persistence of anti-Blackness in the Global North. Though sparked by a single act of police brutality in Minneapolis, cities around the world exploded in protest against the historical and ongoing nature of global anti-Blackness. One outcome of this is to provoke a conversation within academic disciplines about whose voices get heard (and whose do not). Du Bois spent his life trying to enlighten the labor movement and “mainstream” Marxism about the existence and role of anti-Blackness as an essential quality of capitalism. In some corners he was shunned or dismissed for these efforts. Perhaps the time has come to adapt his valuable contributions to the field of geography.

With that in mind, this essay places his work in conversation with several ongoing debates in urban geography. My argument is as follows: notwithstanding some notable exceptions, much of the political economy tradition in urban geography continues without a
serious conception of how racialization affects or drives political change or uneven development, among other common topics. The work of Du Bois offers specific emphases and insights which accept the fundamental materialism of the Marxian perspective, but augment it with a more robust conception of racism. Moreover, given how important he was to the Black radical tradition, and the fields of sociology and history, there is a parallel literature of critical engagement with Du Bois’ scholarship where his ideas were refined (among many others see: Robinson, 1983; Reed, 1985; Kendhammer, 2007; Meer, 2019; Davidson, 2020; Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020). From both this literature and Du Bois’ original works, I argue that there are three emphases in his work that could improve and enhance some corners of contemporary urban geography. First, Du Bois understood that racism was not only focused on Black people, but he emphasizes how acute anti-Black racism was and remains. Second, his work illustrates the durability and malleability of racism in different geographic and temporal scales. Third, his work emphasizes the economic value of organized racism—its role at dividing the working class for elite benefit in particular. These elements are either missing or poorly theorized within much of the urban political economy paradigm in geography (Spence, 2015; Hackworth, 2019b; Danewid, 2020). I view this as a problem of omission rather than commission. I do not believe, and do not wish to convey, that the urban political economy paradigm is somehow fatally flawed because of its elision of race—I do mean to suggest that it is incomplete without such an emphasis. My critique is thus sympathetic and built on a desire to persuade urban political economists to include elements that might improve the paradigm.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the three aforementioned emphases in the work of Du Bois and attempts to convey the complexity of his work in general. Section three applies Du Boisian insights to the economic theory of political change. Section
four applies the Du Boisian paradigm to studies of gentrification and uneven development. The final section concludes with a broader discussion of how the Du Boisian perspective can improve modern urban geography.

**Finding Du Bois’ materialism**

Du Bois’ scholarly life spanned seven decades and focused on myriad themes. He was an eclectic, thoughtful man whose views evolved on some subjects, while remaining relatively constant on others. He wrote scholarly papers and books, dabbled in data visualization (Du Bois et al, 2018), and wrote an extraordinary number of short essays for wider consumption. Scholars have therefore, understandably struggled to characterize him or his view (Reed, 1985). Broadly, some have noted three periods of emphasis (Kendhammer, 2007). His first few decades of work have been framed as “liberal-egalitarian”—characterized by the belief that Black people were treated unequally, but that persuasion (primarily writing to show the humanity of Black people) could convince white people to eschew racism. His next phase has been characterized by a gravitation toward Marxism, and the belief that racism would not be dissolved through persuasion, but was an expression of power that needed to be toppled. His final phase—some see it as merely an extension of the second phase, while others view it as an entirely different phase—has been deemed “pan-African” insofar as it focused on the liberation of both African nations and the diaspora of people around the world whose ancestors originated there.

My own position is that these phases, contradictions, and changes in viewpoint make it impossible to identify a singular “Du Boisian position” on almost any subject. My intervention here is not to identify such a position or even to emphasize a cleanly delineated phase. Rather I seek to extract and reassemble several emphases related to the relationship between racism and
capitalism. Though most of these insights came from his “socialist phase”, I also recognize important components in earlier work like *The Philadelphia Negro*, and essays he wrote later in his life. In a variety of outlets, he provides an understanding of racism that was path-breaking for its time, and resonant with modern conceptions of racial capitalism (among many others see Ranganathan, 2016; Bledsoe et al., 2020; Dorries et al, 2020). His most direct and complete theorizations of racism begin in the second decade of the twentieth century. In a series of essays that were later reworked into his first autobiography *Darkwater* (1920), and his magnum opus *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935a), he roots modern racism to colonialism. Phenotypic differences between people, of course, existed before this moment, but Du Bois argues it was the colonial project and its need to diminish the humanity of its victims that created and reproduced the racial hierarchy that governed treatment around the world and within individual societies like the United States. To Du Bois, racism became a way to reconcile the obvious moral atrocities of slavery, exploitation, and colonialism—by constructing the victims as less-than-human, or at the very least inferior to white European people and their descendants. It allows the beneficiaries to reconcile their belief in self and nation, with the moral atrocities upon which they are built. It remains today as white people seek a rational reason for obvious economic inequalities between races—“inferiority” whether genetic or cultural serves this role. As Du Bois (1915: 708), writes, these narratives began under colonialism:

Lying treaties, rivers of rum, murder, assassination, mutilation, rape, and torture have marked the progress of the Englishman, German, Frenchman, and Belgian on the Dark Continent. The only way in which the world has been able to endure the horrible tales is by deliberately stopping its ears and changing the subject of the conversation as the deviltry went on [...] ‘Color’ became the world’s thought synonymous with inferiority,
‘Negro’ lost its capitalization, and Africa was another name for bestiality and barbarism.

Thus the world began to invest in color prejudice.

The narratives of racism were written and performed by elite clergy, writers, film-makers, and historians. They were absorbed by both the beneficiaries and victims of racism. They operated a variety of scales serving to simultaneously justify the brutality of slavery and Jim Crow in places like the American South where many victims of slavery were nearby, and rationalized brutality in places where very few non-white people lived. Du Bois sculpted his ideas about racism over time. There are three elements to his understanding of racism that are particularly useful interventions to modern urban geography debates: 1) the relative intensity of anti-Black racism; 2) the durability and malleability of all forms of racism; and 3) the economic value of racism.

Given its rooting in European colonial exploitation, Du Bois’ notion of racism was not confined to anti-Blackness. In multiple instances he notes the exploitation and brutality committed toward indigenous North American, South Asian, and Chinese people, but he did not ascribe to the notion that racisms were all the same. His writing stressed the severity and depth of anti-Black racism globally and in the United States. He writes of this hierarchy of treatment in *Darkwater* (Du Bois, 1920: 44):

Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is ‘white’; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is ‘yellow’; a bad taste is ‘brown’; and the devil is ‘Black’. The changes of this theme are continually rung in picture and story, in newspaper heading and moving-picture, in sermon and school book, until of course, the King can do no wrong—a White Man is always right and a Black Man has no rights which a white man is bound to respect.
The narrative and logic of anti-Black racism was applied to individual Black people and nations alike. It justified the brutality of slavery, discrimination, colonization, and the imposition of Jim Crow through an organized project to place Blackness beneath humanity. These racist efforts built a veritable “veil” between the Black and white world (Olson, 2005). That veil distorted the true image of Blackness, and divided both the United States and the world along a colour-line.

The second feature of Du Bois’ notion of racism was its durability and malleability. Unlike some other socialists, racism to Du Bois was not an illusory, temporary force, or something that will be dissolved organically and replaced easily with a pan-class alliance. Du Bois provides tedious accounts of the forms that racism took in the United States and globally. In *The Philadelphia Negro*, for example, he documents the following ways that Black people are treated worse than white people in urban America of the late nineteenth century. In chapter 16, “The Contact of the Races”, Du Bois illustrates with statistics and many examples, six forms of exclusion which make the experience of being Black different from white people. Because of colour prejudice, Black people are (Du Bois, 1899: 229-231): 1) more frequently denied access to work; 2) more frequently laid off or kept as temporary workers; 3) given poorer paying, more dangerous employment rather than positions in emerging sectors; 4) forced to pay higher sums for rent and basic sundries; 5) excluded from high quality schools, and 6) avoided and disrespected constantly in public.\(^4\) The end result, he writes, is a systematic exclusion from the economy that intersects with, but also departs from, class exploitation. This exclusion extends, moreover, to Black people who are not in the working class—to the class of doctors, lawyers, and teachers who were also featured in his book. They too were forcibly confined to Philadelphia’s seventh ward, had to pay higher rents, and were subject to personal abuses. These

\(^4\) In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903: 107-121), Du Bois provides a similar list of discrimination forms. In that list however, he adds criminal justice discrimination—namely unfair treatment by law enforcement and the courts.
were not idiosyncratic, minor barriers. They fundamentally distinguished the experience of being Black from white. Early in his career he felt that this animus could be educated out of white people, but by the turn of the twentieth century his views reflected an understanding that racism was far more embedded and durable.

The final element of racism that Du Bois stressed was its economic value to white elites and nations. Robinson (1983) famously deemed Du Bois as one of the earliest Black Marxists for his work in what has become known as “racial capitalism”. There is no singular definition of racial capitalism, but there is a shared recognition that capitalism and racism are co-dependent (exactly how they are co-dependent varies by author). Du Bois described a number of ways that racism benefits white people and nations but his most recurrent (and relevant to modern urban geography debates) argument was that racism is deployed by white elites to sabotage working class alliances. This in turn, enhances elite bargaining positions on matters like unionization, taxation levels, and most important wage rates. Unlike other Marxist historians, Du Bois argued that society is not simply composed of a division between workers and the owners of production. Groupings of equal or greater loyalty and consequence have been formed and dissolved at key moments in history. His views in *Black Reconstruction* are particularly relevant in this regard. Here he divides mid-nineteenth century American society into four social categories—each as cohesive as Marx’ classes of bourgeoisie, petit bourgeoisie, and proletariat: 1) northern industrialists who relied upon the cheap cotton from the South and became increasingly powerful during the century; 2) the planters—the land owning and slave holding oligarchs of the South—

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5 Wilson (2012: 970) argues that the separation of Black neighbourhoods from the white capitalist economy was by design. The larger purpose was to monopolize and contain Black consumption so as to charge higher rates for the same commodities.

6 Shabazz (2015) writes about how the wages of whiteness also extended, provisionally to new immigrants from Europe. Though Irish, German, Jewish, and Italian immigrants were not initially considered “white”, they were allowed to become white primarily through anti-Blackness. Shabazz writes for example about how police of German and Irish descent in Chicago “became white” by being particularly brutal to Black people and neighbourhoods.
whose power was waning; 3) Black workers—mostly enslaved but also composed of important factions of free labor in both the South and the North; and 4) white workers in the South who largely did not see themselves as workers at all—they held deep aspirations which were frequently exploited by planters to own slaves themselves. Planters were conscious of, and invested deeply in, cultivating the loyalty of white workers by allowing them increasing privileges associated with the Cotton Kingdom.

In Black Reconstruction, Du Bois reframes the Civil War as a complicated materialist battle amongst these factions. The two initial roles were the northern industrialists who were gaining power and wanted a different tariff policy for the United States, and the southern planters whose power had slipped in recent years in part because the former were driving down cotton prices. Du Bois desentimentalizes the Civil War and places it in peri-Marxian territory by focusing on the materiality of the events surrounding it, but his primary contribution is to understand how class is not the primary axis of difference—or at least that class exploitation can be overcome with racial exploitation under certain circumstances. Du Bois spends copious time discussing, for example, how southern planters worried about a cross-class alliance between white workers in the South, North, and Black workers throughout. The planters devised various methods to include white workers including most famously making many of them “slave catchers” in the mid-nineteenth century, and allowing some to vote. When war broke out, Du Bois emphasizes the agency of Black workers. He notes that the war was being lost by northern powers until Black workers withheld their labor, walked to union army camps, and eventually fought in the war. The back had been broken via a “general strike” in Du Bois’ retelling. The southern economy—upon which the power of the entire United States was built—had been broken, and enslaved people were freed.
Du Bois then focuses extensively on the aftermath, which provides both some indication of the flexibility of racial discrimination and the narratives and alliances upon which it is built. With much of the South under martial law and in the control of Union armies, incredible progress was achieved in a short period to provide basic rights to freedmen. But as southern planters and white workers began to reconstitute themselves, they immediately joined forces to re-subjugate formerly-enslaved peoples. This included Jim Crow legislation, criminalizing unemployment, and basic violence (lynching in particular). Elite voices emerged during this late nineteenth century period to add a polished veneer to this brutality—the “science” of phrenology emerged to “prove” that Black people were inferior, blackface minstrel plays became popular, and the Dunning School of history emerged to insist that the formerly-enslaved were emotionally devastated by their emancipation (Du Bois, 1935a). Like the aforementioned pro-colonial narratives, these voices justified the continued exploitation and subjugation of Black people. It justified brutal enforcement of Jim Crow to make Black workers weak and to quell dissent thus keeping wage levels low. White workers received both psychic and material benefits in the emergent system. In a material sense, they were able to access better schools, the voting booth, and better employment than Black workers. In a psychic sense, Jim Crow reinforced their belief that they were superior to Black people. This included a number of formal and informal measures including prohibiting Black people from making eye contact with white people as they passed on the sidewalk. It was thus the aspiration and belief in superiority, combined with some material concessions that built and alliance between white workers and capital. In the United

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7 This variant of Du Bois’ scholarship has inspired more recent work broadly under the heading of “critical whiteness studies” (among others see, Ignatiev, 1995; Olson, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; Roediger, 2007; Hackworth, 2019a). The critical whiteness paradigm emphasizes the historical role that white people in general, white workers in particular have had at thwarting racial progress in the United States, and how it is problematic to invoke the “working class” as a force, in and of itself, given this tension.
States, this served to justify the subjugation of people living in the country. In Europe, it served to rationalize the exploitation of colonialism elsewhere.

These three emphases—the acuteness of anti-Blackness, the durability of racism, and the economic value of racism—will guide my critique. In the remainder of this paper, I will apply these emphases to two ongoing, influential debates in urban geography: 1) causes of the rise of neoliberalism; and 2) gentrification and uneven development. I choose these two areas both because of their prominence in the field of urban geography, but also because of my own participation in them. What follows is thus in part an auto-critique. My broad argument is that a substantial portion of the field still employs colourblind logics (my own work included until recently). I seek in this paper to challenge those narratives, and augment them with a Du Boisian insights.

1. Crisis, whiteness, and the neoliberal city

There is arguably no other concept invoked as frequently by contemporary urban geographers as “neoliberalism”. Urban geographers have detailed its rise, and illustrated its effect on urban policy and everyday life (Harvey, 2005; Hackworth, 2007; Peck, 2010). A great deal of this literature uses the experience of the United States and United Kingdom as a vehicle. Geographical contingency should be noted here. The modalities to neoliberalism are dependent on national and local institutions that sometimes deviate from the broader picture painted in theoretical works or the institutional pathways identified in Anglo-American countries (Larner, 2003; D. Wilson, 2005). By the same token though, the U.S. and U.K. are not simply randomly-

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8 There is considerable work on “colourblind racism”, most prominently the work of Bonilla-Silva (2017). Following this conception and others I define colourblindness in this context as the refusal to acknowledge racial differences in treatment, or only explaining such differences in pattern as being the the result of an extra-racial process (like class exploitation).
selected countries incidental to the broader neoliberal turn. Not only are the two countries the 
primary exporters of neoliberalism—in the form of CIA coups (e.g. Chile, Bolivia, Venezuela), 
academic economists (e.g. “the Chicago Boys”), and political proponents (e.g. Reagan and 
Thatcher). The U.S. and U.K. are also arguably subject to the greatest shift toward the neoliberal 
model. Because of the Anglo-American emphasis in the literature and the fact that Du Bois 
focused so closely on the American experience, that variant (the neoliberal city in the United 
States) will be the focus here.

Harvey and others writing about the neoliberal city have illustrated how it entails, among 
other outcomes, a fundamentalist devotion to the free market, hostility toward the social 
economy, and obsession with the individual. Its political rhetoric is couched in the language of 
“freedom” and “personal responsibility”. The most common theory of its origin is the structural 
theory of political change (Harvey, 2005). Harvey’s classic essay “from managerialism to 
tenrepreneurialism” (Harvey, 1989a), and his more recent book The Brief History of 
Neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) have been cited a staggering number of times, as of this writing, 
6,990 and 30,208 times respectively. There is no other theory of comparable influence within 
human geography. These arguments have been repeated, adapted and developed by other 
geographers and social scientists (among others Stein, 1999; Hackworth, 2007; Klein, 2007; 
Peck, 2017a; Kalleberg, 2018). The structural theory of political change emphasizes the role of 
economic crisis at provoking political change. Harvey’s (1989a) “managerialism” period begins 
with the tumult of the Great Depression. Prior to that point, laissez-faire economic policy—that 
is, minimalist intervention by the state in social assistance or economic regulation—reigned. But 
the Depression sent millions of workers into unemployment and many capitalists into 
bankruptcy. Small groups of socialist and Keynesian economists had been writing in obscurity
for several decades about possible ways to construct a more interventionist economy (Blyth, 2002). Once given the opportunity, political figures then rebuilt the state around these more interventionist ideas. Labor and capital agreed to this compromise in exchange for shared growth, wealth, and stability. These interventions included labor protections, relief programs, public pensions, and anti-monopoly regulations, among others. This political environment fostered a setting in which the local state could govern as managers—essentially regulators of capital rather that partners with it (Harvey, 1989a). This included more vigorous enforcement of property taxes, intervention in land use disputes, and less reliance on incentives to attract firms.

These conditions evaporated in the 1970s according to the structural theory of political change (Harvey, 2005). That decade saw the convergence of several economic crises that threatened, then toppled the prevailing Keynesian-managerialist paradigm, particularly in the United States. These crises included widespread unemployment, the cessation of post-War growth rates, Vietnam War debt, and acute inflation. The Keynesian compromise began to fray. This time however, the heretical economists were hard right figures like Hayek, Mises, and Friedman who had long argued that laissez-faire economics was the pathway to freedom and prosperity (Peck, 2010). When the 1970s economic crisis shook the foundation of the Keynesian order, political figures in the 1980s were able to implement this “alternative” vision. Neoliberalism was thus born, and the Keynesian-managerial local state was disappeared. The neoliberal or entrepreneurial city is a conception where the local state is a partner with, and facilitator for, rather than a regulator of capital (Hackworth, 2007; Doucet, 2013; Peck, 2017b; Ward, 2018; Omstedt, 2020). Resources from higher levels of government were removed so that cities had to compete more with one another to attract firms. The “reward” for attracting such
firms is often that they capture the local state and use it to advance their interests—often actively suppressing alternative or even lightly managerialist tendencies.

To be sure, there are geographers who part with a pure structuralist theory of political change. Though not drawing explicitly on Du Bois, geographers have attempted to challenge the colourblind nature of Harvey’s model (see for example: Gilmore, 1999; Gilmore, 2007; Inwood, 2015; Hackworth, 2019a). Inwood (2015), for example, emphasizes on the power of the racist “Southern Strategy” at realigning the American electorate after the 1960s. Gilmore (1999; 2007) adds racism and several other factors—surplus land and labour in particular—to her explanation of social change since the 1960s. These are path-breaking, interesting analyses of social change that deviate from the colourblind nature of the structuralist account. They arrive at a similar place to Du Bois but do not explicitly invoke his work. But these remain the exceptions. The bulk of neoliberal urbanism work does not adequately deal with race or racism (Spence, 2015; Hackworth, 2019a; Danewid, 2020). Most of the debates within theories of neoliberalism, offer a differently-colourblind challenge to this model, accepting the supremacy of economic causation, and the importance of crises in the 1970s, but differing on what modality should be emphasized: ideas, institutions, or interests. Some scholars argue that the key element of 1970s crises that provoked political change are economic interests being threatened (Dumenil and Levy, 2004; Hackworth, 2007; Klein, 2007). Large scale capital was threatened by competition, organized labor by high unemployment, and middle and upper class households by rising taxes. These constituencies pressured political change to occur. Other scholars emphasize the role of institutions (Diamond, 1995; Stahl, 2016). In this conception, the proactive organized efforts of corporations to create think-tanks, buy news media outlets, and invest in political lobbying—
spurred by the infamous Powell Memorandum of 1970\(^9\)—are seen as the most important elements of change. Finally, a group of scholars emphasizes the role of ideas—particularly those that can convert or mask the self-interest of elites (Block and Sommers, 2014; Weaver, 2015; Dilworth and Weaver, 2020). These include a revival of notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, and notions of cultural inferiority and danger to justify austerity. Most of the aforementioned scholars do not part with the underlying assumptions of the model—rather they simply emphasize one or more modalities through which the economic base was transferred into the political superstructure.\(^10\) Du Bois’ historical and economic work offers a different kind of internal challenge that could advance our understanding of political change from a Marxian perspective.

Perhaps the most salient element of this challenge would be the disruption of the “working class” as a singular force. As described earlier, Du Bois argues that inter-racial antagonism between white workers and enslaved (and freed) Black people was economic in orientation—effectively that they were competing with one another for jobs. In *Darkwater* he discusses how racial tensions were exploited for profit in East St. Louis at the turn of the century. Black workers from the South migrated in droves to the city for manufacturing employment that was readily available to white workers. Upon arrival, most Black workers were treated poorly and formally excluded from most white unions, thus denying them a pathway to legal work. There were some exceptions, particularly in factories that were supplying the war effort, but factory owners worked assiduously to undermine even these fragile alliances by positioning

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\(^9\) Written in 1970 by retired supreme court justice Lewis Powell, the Memorandum outlined how corporate American could and should become more assertive in electoral politics. Following its advice, corporations and wealthy Americans started dozens of think-tanks, radio and television stations, and started political action committees.

\(^10\) This is not to say there are not major challenges to the neoliberalism thesis, only that most are epistemologically external to the political economy paradigm. There is major debate, for example, over the definition and source of neoliberalism from anarchist and Foucauldian perspectives.
white and Black workers against one another. Eventually these forces fueled a massacre of Black workers and pillage of Black neighbourhoods in 1917. Importantly, as Du Bois describes, the hatred of industrial exploitation was diluted or replaced by hatred for replacement Black workers, their families and their neighbourhoods. The “captains of industry”, he wrote (1935b: 268), “spend large sums of money to make laborers think that the most worthless white man is better than any colored man”. Employers stoked these divisions but did not wholly create them.

And this was not unique to East St. Louis. As he writes (1920: 97)

Eastward from St. Louis lie great centers, like Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, and New York; in every one of these and in lesser centers there is not only the industrial unrest of war and revolutionized work, but there is a call for workers, the coming of Black folk, and the deliberate effort to divert the thoughts of men, and particularly workingmen, into channels of race hatred against Blacks.

Du Bois is always clear to highlight the role of profit in the motives of industrialists, but he repeatedly illustrates how this pursuit involved the creation and exploitation of racial hatred. Thus no matter how exploited the white worker was, the Black worker was treated even more brutally.

If he had lived long enough to write about the rise of neoliberalism, Du Bois likely would have at least partially agreed with the importance of 1970s economic crises as a catalyst for change. But just as surely, Du Bois would likely have extended the lens wider to understand the rise of neoliberalism, and the constituencies that benefit from it. First, his perspective would have likely led to a reinterpretation of the Keynesian-managerial period in general. This period is framed as a general swing toward worker rights and protections, but historians, including Du Bois (1935b; 1944) have pointed out how many of the major acts of legislation were riddled with
racially-exclusive features. Relief programs were for whites first, Social Security pensions were
denied to agricultural workers (which the majority of Black Americans were at the time), and
housing programs contained overt and covert measures that relegated Black Americans to virtual
apartheid like settings, while opening the opportunity for white wealth accumulation for workers
(Gilmore, 1999; Rigueur, 2015; Rothstein, 2017; Hackworth, 2019a). In order to secure the
support of southern working class, represented by the Democratic Party, Roosevelt included
these provisions, appointed reactionary white politicians from the South to administer his
programs, and avoided integration calls by Black leaders (Rothstein, 2017). For its part, white
organized labor was generally not racially tolerant (Du Bois, 1944: 454); more often than not, it
was hostile to Black people in the South and rural Midwest. Black people were prohibited from
unions and good jobs (Sugrue, 2005). Racist owners agreed with this denial unless they needed
Black people to break the strikes of white workers. The Keynesian-managerial period could be
seen as the fruit of an alliance between regional factions of white labor, but it explicitly
eliminated a large portion of the population by design. This benefited capital, of course, but it
also benefited white labor. There was not a pan-working class shift toward an embedded market.
The benefits of the New Deal were “confined almost entirely to the white race” (Du Bois, 1944:
454), by design. Any benefits to Black workers were residual, and resented by many white
Americans as “undeserved”.

Second, and related, a Du Boisian influence might provoke geographers to reinterpret, or
at least expand the notion of crisis in the 1970s. In particular, he would likely have prodded us to
consider how reaction to racial progress was exploited by Northern industrialists. The latter had
been the primary faction against the New Deal, but had little political traction when their main
alternative was unvarnished austerity (Rigueur, 2015). The Republican Party, which represented
their interests, was largely in the political wilderness during the 1930s but by the same token, the New Deal coalition was beginning to crumble as early as the 1940s because of divisions over racial progress (Du Bois, 1944). Though Roosevelt was keen to placate southern reactionaries in his party, his successors in the national Democratic Party increasingly had to consider the potential votes of Black people who had migrated to northern cities during the Great Migration (Rigueur, 2015). The Democratic Party began a slow migration from its segregationist past. Important moments in this transition include Truman’s partial desegregation of the Army in 1948, the Brown versus Board of Education case in 1954 (issued by Roosevelt appointed judges), and eventually the three major civil rights acts of the 1960s. These actions splintered the coalition upon which the Keynesian-managerial state was built (Inwood, 2013; Inwood, 2015). Southern Democrats revolted in a number of ways, most prominently by running reactionary candidates in 1948 and 1968 for presidency. Until these measures occurred, Democrats enjoyed almost complete control of the electorate in the South. Republicans were almost completely shut out of the South, but this began to change in the 1960s and 1970s. White, northern industrial factions were able to exploit these fissures through political messaging that suggested that politics was a zero-sum game—whites would be giving up their “wages” if they agreed to concessions to Black people (Haney-Lopez, 2014; Inwood, 2013; Inwood, 2015). The uprisings of the 1960s were reframed as “criminal riots”, the desegregation of schools was reframed as

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11 Though neither was ultimately successful at winning the presidency, they remain the only third party candidates in the twentieth century to win electoral votes. Strom Thurmond, the reactionary candidate in 1948, won four southern states and 39 electoral votes. George Wallace, the 1968 candidate, won five states and 46 electoral votes, again all in the South. Wallace also received a considerable vote percentage in white rural areas surrounding cities like Detroit and Cincinnati (Hackworth, 2019a).

12 As some evidence of the power of the Roosevelt machine in the South, consider that he received over 85% of the vote in six southern states in 1932 and 1936. His performance in other parts of the country was much more mixed.

13 Du Bois (1944) notes as early as the mid-1940s that northern industrialists were trying to align with the remnants of the southern Planters to build an anti-New Deal coalition around racial reaction. He (1944: 451-2) writes, “We see today a combination of northern investors and southern Bourbons desiring not simply to overthrow the New Deal but to plunge the United States into fatal reaction.”
“forced busing”, and the Civil Rights Movement was seen as an unjustified “hand out” to Black people (Delmont, 2016). In both rhetoric and policy, these maneuvers realigned the American electorate. Fewer white workers were willing to vote for Democratic candidates. Most avoided the sharp language of racism to justify this switch—instead repeating the language being used by national level Republicans on “freedom of choice” (Hohle, 2015; Inwood, 2015; Perez and Salter, 2019). In short, a Du Boisian perspective would challenge the exclusively-economic explanation of the neoliberal city. The Conservative Movement successfully reminded white people that they enjoyed greater economic and social access than Black people. As told in this narrative and believed by many white workers, those wages of whiteness were threatened by Democrats insisting that their schools educate Black children, their neighbourhoods house Black families, and their jobs be open to competition from Black workers.

2. Gentrification, anti-Blackness, uneven development

Research on investment and disinvestment, with a particular focus on gentrification has been abundant in urban geography (among many others: Smith, 1996; Ley, 1996; Lees, Slater, and Wyly, 2013). Within the political economy paradigm, Smith’s theory of uneven development (1982; 2010) remains foundational and influential (Wyly and Hammel, 1999; Lopez-Morales, et al., 2019). In his wide-ranging book, *Uneven Development*, Smith explored a core dialectical tendency within capitalism. That tendency is captured on the one end by capital’s need for growth opportunities (equalization), and on the other by its need to protect and separate those investments from threats to stable growth (differentiation). The equalization-differentiation dialectic works on a variety of different scales from the global to the neighbourhood (Harvey, 1978; Harvey, 1989b; Smith, 1982). Smith (1982) was one of the first to apply this logic to the
scale of individual cities, even individual neighbourhoods. The stagnation of profit opportunities in the suburbs for example, led investors, to seek out less expensive real estate in the city en masse in the 1970s (Smith, 1979; Smith, 1982). It also led to more microscopic, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood efforts to find profit opportunities (Smith et al., 1989; Smith, 1996; Hackworth, 2000). The underlying logic of this was that gentrification occurs because inner core housing has been devalorized by years of disinvestment. A “rent gap” emerges wherein renovation of that property can restore its actualized ground rent (Smith, 1979; Lopez-Morales et al., 2019). The greatest rent gaps exist in places where land values have been most suppressed. Gentrification, within this paradigm represents the equalization half of Smith’s dialectic—it is representative of capital seeking new opportunities for profit because the higher yields of the suburbs or other sectors have expired or waned.

It would be incorrect to suggest that urban geographers have wholly neglected race or the gentrification of Black spaces. Geographers have noted the lack of engagement with race and difference broadly speaking in gentrification studies (among many others, Ghertner, 2015; Jackson, 2017; Valle, 2018). And there has been considerable work that specifically focuses on the process in Black majority neighbourhoods in the United States. Summers’ (2019) Black in Place, is a noteworthy recent example. She explores the displacement of Black culture and eventually Black people from Washington DC’s H Street Corridor. In this regard, she builds on a tradition that has focused on the gentrification of Black neighbourhoods in New York (Taylor, 2002; Hyra, 2008), Chicago (Wilson and Grammenos, 2005; Anderson and Sternberg, 2013), and Atlanta (Inwood, 2010) among others. A smaller, but influential tangent of this work has looked at the gentrification of Black neighbourhoods for Black middle class professionals (Hyra, 2008; Inwood, 2010; Hyra 2017). Neil Smith himself (along with Richard Schaffer) was an early
student of gentrification in Harlem when it was nearly 100 percent Black in the early 1980s (Schaffer and Smith, 1986; Smith, 1996). But while there are a considerable number of examples of empirical application, the role of race at facilitating or impeding gentrification is not entirely clear within the uneven development framework. Schaffer and Smith (1986: 351) frame Harlem as an anomaly, noting that “with some exceptions, heavily black neighbourhoods have been perceived as harder to gentrify”. Others have subsequently gone on to confirm the implied sentiment that gentrification is less likely to occur, or will occur only after “more suitable” white working class neighbourhoods have been gentrified in the particular city (Charles, 2003; Wilson and Grammenos, 2005; Sampson and Sharkey, 2008; Hwang and Sampson, 2014; Hwang, 2016; Hackworth, 2020). Without however, a more serious theoretical engagement with anti-Black racism—when, and in what ways, it impedes gentrification and when it does not—the tendency of Black neighbourhoods being the last or slowest to gentrify poses a challenge to Smith’s rent gap.

The most basic challenge involves the calculation and production of value (and devalue) in different neighbourhood contexts. There has been considerable work on how Black neighbourhoods have been forcibly segregated and how Black households have been denied access to white spaces in American cities (Massey and Denton, 1993; Rothstein, 2017; Korver-Glenn, 2018; Trounstine, 2018). Among other outcomes, this has driven down prices in the most African American neighbourhoods. A recent Brookings Institute study, for example, found that houses in Black neighbourhoods were worth approximately half of the value of similar houses in white neighbourhoods in the same region (Perry et al., 2018). On its face then, this would suggest that an artificial rent gap is present in Black majority neighbourhoods. Why, given price suppression, are Black neighbourhoods not the first to experience gentrification? If it is because
of anti-Black racism, under what conditions does that racism inhibit gentrification and under what conditions does it not?

Du Bois died before gentrification became a common topic in urban geography, but we can glue together fragments from his oeuvre that offer a different amendment to the theory of uneven development and the particular challenge posed by anti-Blackness. Above all, Du Bois would have recognized the organized role of real estate capital, and its concern with profit. But his approach was not, and would not have been colourblind. His thoughts on this subject are most fully drawn out in *The Philadelphia Negro*. There, he notes with great detail how land owners in Philadelphia’s seventh ward and surrounding areas organized to contain and exploit Black people. First, like other aspects of his research and activism, he illustrates with great detail, why Black people are subject to exploitation that is more severe and organized than the exploitation of the white working class. While there may be disinvested, devalorized white or multi-racial neighbourhoods throughout the city, the denial of access to jobs, decent housing, and consumer goods make the “Black district” in a city different from a disinvested white neighbourhood. White working class and elite groups shared (and continue to share) considerable prejudice against Black people. During the time of *The Philadelphia Negro*, the main, organized strategy was to contain Black people to one district. This was common throughout the United States into the twentieth century. The main “value” consideration was “protecting” white neighbourhoods elsewhere in the city from Black people living in, or even visiting them—a sort of racially-prejudiced form of Smith’s differentiation. At other points, a form of racially-prejudiced equalization prevailed in the form of forcible displacement of the same neighbourhoods for redevelopment and generation of profit.
The second, and related, intervention that Du Boisian work offers here is a focus on the underlying reasons for this value consideration. Not only does he identify the underlying animus of white people (virtually regardless of class) to living with or near Black people, he illustrates how that preference gets organized by elites to structure the landscape. “The undeniable fact that,” he (1899: 211) writes,

most Philadelphia white people prefer not to live near Negroes limits the Negro very seriously in his choice of a home and especially in the choice of a cheap home [...] real estate agents knowing the limited supply usually raise the rent a dollar or two more for Negro tenants, if they do not refuse them altogether.

In Du Bois’ conception, capitalism needs racism (and other forms of distinction) to create social justifications for increased profit opportunities, despite their obvious immorality in a “free” society. In this instance, Du Bois illustrates how the basic prejudice against all Black people constrained supply that real estate capitalists were able to exploit. Contemporary research in sociology and urban studies continues to illustrate the unwillingness of white people to live in majority Black neighbourhoods (Farley et al., 1978; Farley et al., 1994; Krysan et al., 2008; Thomas, 2013), and the organization of this sentiment by the real estate industry (Massey and Denton, 1993; Glotzer, 2020) and the state (Rothstein, 2017; Trounstine, 2018). So while, disinvestment may lead to lower prices and thus the opportunity for rent gaps to be closed, there are other ways that capitalists have been able to exploit racial prejudice for their profits.

Finally, Du Bois’ emphasis on how narratives of racism justify inequality and mistreatment could be applied helpfully to the cases where gentrification does occur in Black neighbourhoods. Smith and others have noted how narratives of “progress” and “settlement” serve to pathologize the target community, and sanctify the actions of gentrifiers. “Urban
pioneers” are heroic figures that improve a neighbourhood and make it “liveable”. Bledsoe and Wright (2018) have noted how anti-Blackness amplifies and reinforces this sentiment. City leaders and many white citizens celebrate the “improvement” to neighbourhood and the displacement of “bad elements” that kept it down before. Anti-Black racism is a potent accelerant for the dehumanization of displacees.

In short, the uneven development paradigm is influential in modern urban geography, but most studies utilizing it do not theorize race in a very complete or sophisticated way. The quest for profit embedded in the rent gap model is indeed real and potent, but it intersects with, fuels, and is fuelled by a co-present anti-Blackness that is arguably more impactful on land values than distance from downtown or architectural style (i.e. common reasons for variation within gentrification studies). Gentrifiers are seeking value targets as the rent gap thesis insists, but white gentrifiers are also motivated in many instances by an anti-Blackness which fuels a reluctance to residential choice in non-white living environments.

Conclusion

Because of the erudition of figures like Harvey, Massey, and Smith, Marxism and allied materialist approaches have arguably had more of an influence upon geography than any other contemporary social science. But like the broader Marxian tradition, the materialist paradigm in geography has not always adequately included an understanding of ethno-racial exploitation and its value. There is still a substantial presence of colourblind urban political economy in the field. My argument is that this is a problem of omission, rather than commission. The political economy paradigm holds tremendous value in understanding and theorizing political change and
urban investment among other topics, but without an understanding of race and racism, this value is limited.

This is certainly not the first time such a critique has been made, but surprisingly few critiques of this nature have explored the broader Black radical tradition as a source of support for an alternate paradigm. This is unfortunate because the broader tradition and key figures within it, including but not limited to Du Bois, have been crafting a colour-conscious political economy for almost 150 years. Unlike other challenges to the political economy paradigm, such insights can be deployed to form a more internal critique than challenges which do not accept or develop materialist principles at all. W.E.B. Du Bois is only one author from that tradition but his work carries considerable weight. Not only was he one of the first Black scholars to challenge the political economy paradigm from within, but he does so in ways that are very similar to “novel” interventions in racial capitalism theory. An essay of this length can only gesture to his considerable oeuvre and invite continued dialogue, but I would suggest that there are three elements of his work that can be easily and immediately brought to bear on modern urban geography. First, he provides copious examples and a more complete theorization of the severity of anti-Black racism than studies which flatten all oppressions into a single category. Second, his emphasis and willingness to delve into white animus toward non-white people, opens the insight that racism is both present and durable. The disappearance of one form does not suggest the disappearance of racism itself. Third and final, his work provides a framework for understanding the economic value of racism at a variety of scales. As geography moves to a more serious consideration of anti-Blackness and racial capitalism, it is important to adequately survey the theoretical parents of ideas that are sometimes framed as novel. The work of Du Bois provides a vehicle to better understanding these features from within a materialist framework.
Reference list:


