

Democracy's Values and Ideals: A Duboisian Defense

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Abstract:

This essay offers a Duboisian defense of democracy's expressive and experimental values. It argues that the expressive value of democracy supports an ideal of inclusion, whereas the experimental value of democracy supports that of innovation. One appeals to the ideal of inclusion to extend to excluded groups codified constitutional protections and to condemn white hypocrisy. The ideal of innovation, in contrast, helps one reimagine what constitutional protections should be in the first place. Drawing on Du Bois's writings, this essay argues that the civic activities of black American counter-publics exhibited both experimental and expressive democratic values. In particular, it highlights the innovations of black women civic leaders who reimaged care work under a public conception of the common good. It concludes that counter-publics shape the asymmetric moral insight of its participants, namely, the oppressed.

Introduction.

There is much that W.E.B. Du Bois's critique of American democracy offers to contemporary democratic theory.¹ In this essay, I investigate the democratic values and ideals that shape the political culture of black counter-publics. Du Bois outlines two distinct, but complementary, evaluative commitments that flourished there. On the one hand, he illuminates the expressive value of democracy to support an ideal of inclusion, which encourages persons to come together to participate in democratic practices for their own sake. An inclusive democracy respects civic fellows as co-authors of the terms of political rule. On the other hand, experimental democratic practices affirm an ideal of moral innovation to rework accepted norms of governance

¹ My essay primarily draws on Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chapter 6 of *Darkwater*, and *Black Reconstruction*.

in the light of the novel challenges of the excluded. The experimental value of democracy shows a people redefining the very ends of democratic governance. Each ideal—that of inclusion and innovation—flourished in the twentieth-century black American counter-public and took shape in response to the crisis of the color line.

The essay proceeds as follows. Section I introduces the distinction between the expressive and experimental values. Section II outlines the ideals attached to each evaluative orientation introduced in Section I. Section III identifies some concrete moral innovations of black counter-publics, focusing on the democratic provision of assets in productive and reproductive labor. Section IV concludes that the asymmetric moral insight of the oppressed originates from a counter-public's localized political culture.

1. Culture and Practice: Democratic Values Behind the Color Line

Du Bois observes two kinds of evaluative orientations that distinguish political culture behind the color line.² These orientations historically characterize the perspective of participants in the black counter-public to inform the political cultural basis of what Du Bois calls black “spiritual striving” (Du Bois 2007, 3). Du Bois argues that black Americans have demanded that the state should recognize their deliberative autonomy as free and equal civic fellows for its own sake. From this perspective, one does *not* pursue democracy merely for its beneficial consequences, say, to mitigate suffering. Instead, the perspective presupposes that in a democracy all persons should enjoy the free exercise and equal recognition of their public voice. In the context of the broken promise of Reconstruction, Du Bois notes that the public expression of black moral

² I do not mean to imply that black cultural norms only have a political significance for Du Bois. For an excellent account of Du Bois's linking culture to racial identity, see (Jeffers 2013).

powers remains unwelcome. Following Jennifer Morton (unpublished) and Elizabeth Anderson (2009), let's call this view the "expressive" value of democracy. Agents "express" a "distinctive symbolic value" through their democratic participation, which is an intrinsic moral good (Morton, 4-5). Morton observes that a democracy "is not only valuable in bringing about certain political goals, but in allowing us to relate to each other as equals" (4). Democracy's expressive value is irreducible to the instrumental goods that a democratic government might provide, such as resources and security. The maintenance of free, equal and mutually respectful public relations among civic fellows is valuable for its own sake. Anderson thus advocates the "non-instrumental" good of honing "habits of mutual consultation and cooperation that express respect and sympathy for all [civic fellows]" (2009, 223). As I detail below, Du Bois stresses that democratic practices behind the color line embraced democracy's expressive value, notwithstanding blacks' systematic exclusion and intragroup disagreements.

Du Bois also emphasizes that democracy does lead to considerable gains, in addition to being a practice that should be—and was—pursued for its own sake. Following Du Bois, let's call this the "experimental" value of democracy (1999, 82-90. Cf. Du Bois 1998, 711-14). On this view, democracy is an experimental means for honing knowledge through trial and error to enhance outcomes, specifically, a notion of *the common good*. This too is a value orientation that informs twentieth-century black American democratic culture. Du Bois writes, "The theory of democratic government is not that the will of the people is always right, but rather that normal human beings of average intelligence will, if given a chance, learn the right and the best course by bitter experience" (Du Bois 2007b, 84-85). Through experimentation, a group achieves insight into how best to share a political community, so that all persons can flourish.

In the sections below, I link each evaluative orientation to a corresponding ideal that

historically reflects the democratic practices behind the color line. I show, first, that the expressive value of democracy supports an ideal of inclusion that seeks to actualize in practice constitutional protections that the polity accepts in principle. Second, I argue that the experimental value of democracy challenges the public conception of the common good; it reimagines the very ends of democratic life to rework what a people might endorse under the legitimate purview of democratic governance. Du Bois opines that the ideal of moral innovation should also sustain democratic practices that aim for more ambitious constitutional protections than that of already codified rights.

Before I proceed, consider my method of rational reconstruction. I interpret a people's evaluative commitments on the ground, so to speak, to elicit their acceptance of *ideals*. The expressive and experimental values are embedded in the black counter-public; this enables a philosopher to undertake a rational reconstruction of the political culture that sustains a pattern of social values and practices. Drawing from a sociohistorical account of the actual structure of the black counter-public, Du Bois endorses a normative theory of democracy that makes prescriptive interventions about best practices. To be sure, one cannot conclude retroactively that each member of the black American community self-consciously espoused the ideals I lay out below, though Du Bois notes that they often did. So too, as John Rawls notes, one cannot conclude that every member of a constitutional democracy explicitly adopts its underlining ideals, which are embodied in what Rawls calls "constitutional essentials," though many do (1993, 227-30). I do believe, however, that a person committed to the general evaluative orientations of expression and experimentation would upon self-reflection accept the ideals I reconstruct below.

In any case, Du Bois's characterization of black spiritual striving is bound to a vibrant picture of a group's pursuit of ideals (Du Bois 2007, 8-10). He observes that robust evaluative commitments are not conjured by him. After all, he invites his reader to imagine that black

Americans are “ordinary human beings” (1998, xxv). The implications of his invitation are radical: it forces one to contend with the expressive and experimental moral powers of black agency as *embodied*. My method of rational reconstruction thus presupposes a theory of practical reason that holds that any “ordinary” person can remake—and has—their political culture without having to outline their decision-making process (Cf. Cooper 1998, 292-93).³ The upshot is that blacks not only have an inalienable right to exercise their moral powers but, in the past, have done so successfully, sometimes by publicly striving for ideals, notwithstanding the racial violence and ideology that tried to flout them.

2. Democracy’s Expressive Value and the Ideal of Inclusion

In this section, I appeal to the idea of the expressive value of democracy to challenge arbitrary restrictions on voting and exclusionary constitutional interpretation. I thereby elicit Du Bois’s reasoning in support of equal constitutional protections that build mutually respectful civic bonds. For the expressive value of democracy necessitates the expansion of the boundaries of political community across color and gender lines. At a minimum, for everyone to be able to enjoy the expressive value of democracy an ideal of inclusion should enforce access to the ballot, as well as other constitutionally protected rights and liberties, that the polity accepts in principle, but seldom in practice.

Consider Du Bois’s advocacy for the 19th Amendment, which gave American women the right to vote in 1920. In Chapter 6, “Of the Ruling of Men” of *Darkwater*, published in 1920, he offers his most extensive defense of universal voter enfranchisement, articulating an ideal of inclusion that secures all groups’ equal constitutional standing to rule and elect their rulers. In the

³ A philosopher can provide a streamlined picture of a decision-making process.

early twentieth century, reactionary critics accused women and people of color of lacking the requisite knowledge and experience to vote. The critic posited that white men were best positioned to be the benevolent guardians of “ignorant” groups (Du Bois 1999, 138-40). Du Bois objects, “it is simply the old cry of privilege, the old assumption that there are those in the world who know better what is best for others than those others know themselves, and who can be trusted to do this best” (1999, 81). He argues that not only should excluded groups be able to participate in democratic decision-making, but they have been fighting for constitutional protections to do so. He proceeds to explain why one cannot rationalize disenfranchisement based on the supposed ignorance of new voters.

First, franchise restrictions disrespect the expression of persons’ inalienable moral powers for their own sake; epistemological conditions are morally irrelevant for determining who should enter the public sphere (Du Bois 1999, 80-81, 147). I have detailed elsewhere that Du Bois was an ardent critic of poll taxes and literacy tests that restrict suffrage (1998, chp. 15; 1999, 139; Basevich 2021). He distinguishes knowledge in general, of letters, industry, and craftsmanship, from that of the moral prowess to rule well (Du Bois 1999, 78).⁴ Recall my observation that democracy presupposes a theory of practical agency that assumes that however limited one’s knowledge or experience might be, one still possesses full moral standing for political participation. Admittedly, Du Bois grants that practice can sharpen judgment—espousing an account of moral education via democratic practice to which I will return in the concluding section—but he qualifies this claim by stressing that neither technical expertise about statecraft, knowledge of literature and the arts, nor political experience per se should be requisite for voting:

Again, to make experience a qualification for the franchise is absurd: it would stop the

⁴ Aristotle’s distinctions of *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis* are instructive here. For further discussion of Du Bois’s reliance on Aristotle’s *Politics* in his democratic theory, see (Fertik 2019).

spread of democracy and make political power hereditary, a prerequisite of a class, caste, race, or sex. [...] Today the civilized world is being ruled by the descendants of persons who a century ago were pronounced incapable of ever developing a self-ruling people. (Du Bois 1999, 81)

Prima facie, Du Bois appears to claim simply that the historical introduction of democratic government meant that inexperienced novices had to give it a try. But this observation is true to the history of any form of government—someone had to be the inexperienced first. His observation, alternatively, points to democracy’s moral grounding. For it to take root, a people must adopt a striking normative stance towards each other. They must accept its expressive moral power to challenge who counts as a legitimate member of the polity on an ongoing basis. For any group’s entry into the formal public sphere elicits the distinctive, symbolic value of political participation for its own sake. Without an ideal of inclusion, none can really enjoy the expressive value of democracy, save for hypocrites who say one thing but do another. That is, hypocrites give lip service to democracy for democracy’s sake, while destroying inclusive civic bonds. In doing so, they make democracy a means of accumulating personal power, rather than substantiating its expressive moral ground.

Everyone should “speak for themselves,” Du Bois explains, regardless of their apparent lack of experience or formal training (1999, 144). He rejects critiques of suffrage that speculate that bad consequences would follow, if the state expands the franchise to unsophisticated and uneducated groups (Du Bois 1999, 83; Du Bois 2007a, chp. 3; Anderson 2016, 76). Even were the reactionary critic proven right, it would not matter. None should have to sacrifice their public voice to a trusteeship because being able to speak for oneself constitutes the moral ground of democratic life (Du Bois 1999, 145-46).⁵ Du Bois thus regards women—black and nonblack—as self-

⁵ Expressivism need not endorse direct democracy so long as would-be representatives engage their constituency in good faith as their moral equals.

authenticating sources of valid claims. He grants that others can find “solutions to political problems,” even if they lack formal “experience” in finding such solutions (Du Bois 1999, 81). Consequently, he does not fear their vote as ushering in a catastrophe but is rather optimistic about the prospective outcome of universal voter enfranchisement. “Liberty trains for liberty,” he writes, “Responsibility is the first step in responsibility” (Du Bois 1996, 236).

Second, Du Bois argues that rationalizations for voter restrictions betray white hypocrisy. He raises a provocative question: what does it mean to be a competent and experienced voter in the first place? The relevant criterion of evaluation of how ‘well’ one can do democracy should not be whether members of excluded groups are smart enough. The relevant criterion of evaluation should be whether a democratic people live up to the ideals that they—and their state—nominally profess, but hardly practice. A group that monopolizes political power and draws exclusionary lines cannot enjoy democracy’s expressive value, which aims to build mutually respectful ties with civic fellows. The continuous expansion of the scope of civic bonds is the ultimate “test” of whether the unprecedented “experiment” of modern American democracy is a success or could be so in the future (Du Bois 1913, 140). Du Bois surmises that for much of modern American history his civic fellows weren’t practicing democracy as much as a form of illiberal rule that fortified color and gender lines. In other words, a democracy with color and gender lines is a democracy in name only and generally its most prominent members are hypocrites who say one thing and do another. As Charles Mills notes, from the point of view of white supremacist power, justice means “Just us” (1997, xix)

In brief, the ideal of inclusion highlights the contradiction between principle and practice with respect to something akin to a Rawlsian picture of “constitutional essentials” (Rawls 1993, 227-30). In addition to the right to vote and “to participate in politics,” the idea of constitutional

essentials includes equal basic rights and political liberties, such as “liberty of conscience, freedom of thought and association, as well as the protections of the rule of law” (Rawls 1993, 227). Contrary to some prominent African philosophers, I submit that Du Bois does *not* believe that the so-called “DNA” of the U.S. public political culture entails white supremacist ideology (2007a, 42; Cf. Mills 1997). Du Bois echoes Frederick Douglass that the Constitution should be regarded, in principle, as a racially inclusive document to guide future democratic development.⁶ He underscores that counter-publics have challenged—and must continue to do so—the republic to enforce equal basic rights and political liberties. The popular push of the oppressed to expand constitutional protections would be unsound if the ideal of a constitutional democracy itself is unsound.

Notwithstanding his rejection of epistemological conditions for democratic life, Du Bois adds that the excluded do have a unique wisdom honed by difficult experiences. The irony is that excluded groups evinced a tenacious, long-standing commitment to the ideals *and* practices that make democratic government possible, whereas the practices entrenched in the formal public sphere tend to militate against democratic development. The irony is tragic: Those who do have experiences germane to governing well are precisely those who are barred from the formal public

⁶ In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois draws on Douglass’s claim that the constitution should be a moral basis for abolition, quoting Douglass:

I hold that the Federal Government was never, in its essence, anything but an antislavery government. Abolish slavery tomorrow, and not a sentence or syllable of the Constitution need be altered. It was purposely so framed as to give no claim, no sanction to the claim of property in man. If in its origin slavery had any relation to the government, it was only as the scaffolding to the magnificent structure, to be removed as soon as the building was completed. There is in the Constitution no East, no West, no North, no South, no black, no white, no slave, no slaveholder, but all are citizens who are of American birth. (1998, 102)

sphere and for whom entry comes at great sacrifice. In the face of persistent loss and racial violence, Du Bois underscores that black Americans did somehow retain a public joint commitment to constitutional essentials. Remarking on black democratic practices during the Jim Crow era, he pronounces that “democracy died save for in the hearts of black folk” (1998, 30). His observation suggests that at least behind the color line in black-led civil and cultural associations the expressive value of democracy was kept alive. In a sense, propertied white men are the real newcomers to democratic life, albeit they’ve long held the franchise. Ironically, their technical expertise about statecraft, their knowledge of literature and the arts, and their political experience in white-controlled institutions tended to *blunt* their moral sensibility, as these morphed into the cultural artifacts of white supremacist ideology that vitiated intergroup civic bonds. Further, given *de jure* racial exclusions, the black counter-public shielded its participants, predominantly but not always black Americans, from the morally distorting effects of racial ideology on group self-consciousness (Du Bois 1999, 240; Rogers 2009; Basevich 2019; Basevich 2022).

3. The Experimental Value of Democracy and the Ideal of Moral Innovation

In this section, I sketch Du Bois’s account of the activities of the black counter-public in the light of democracy’s experimental value. Du Bois stresses that democracy leads to positive outcomes. Namely, it can enhance participants’ evaluative and epistemic capacities. The readiness to learn from experience enlarges the basis of public knowledge to fine-tune accepted standards of rule. Unlike its expressive moral value, democracy’s experimental dimension does not just highlight the contradiction between accepted norm and reality to scrutinize the exclusionary *de facto* fault lines of political community. More ambitiously, it reimagines the very ends that an inclusive democratic government ought to uphold in the first place. The experimental value of

democracy encourages *moral innovation* to push a people to rethink the ends that democratic government ought to promote.

There are numerous passages in Du Bois's writings that illustrate democracy's experimental power. Regard this passage from *Black Reconstruction*:

After the American experiment a considerable number of thinkers conceived that possibly most men had capabilities, except, of course, Negroes. Possibly never in human history before or since have so many men believed in [black] manhood [...] as after the Battle of Port Hudson, when Negroes fought for Freedom [on the side of the Union during the U.S. Civil War].

All men know that by sheer weight of physical force, the mass of men must in the last resort become the arbiters of human action. But reason, skill, wealth, machines and power may for long periods enable the few to control the many. But to what end? The current theory of democracy is that dictatorship is a stopgap pending the work of universal education, equitable income, and strong character. But always the temptation is to use the stopgap for narrower ends, because intelligence, thrift and goodness seem so impossibly distant for most men. We rule by junta; we turn Fascist, because we do not believe in men; yet the basis of fact in this disbelief is incredibly narrow. (1998, 340)

Du Bois equates increased public “knowledge” of “men” with the expansion of the scope of democratic control and a collective awakening to democracy's higher purpose. Conversely, if a polity rebuffs a people's inputs, then government “narrows” its ends and sows an unwarranted distrust in citizens' evaluative and epistemic capacities. “The narrower the appeal, the poorer the culture; the wider the appeal the more magnificent are the possibilities” (Du Bois 1999, 140).

The first lesson to take away here is that the contradiction between accepted norms and reality itself only becomes manifest through experience; insight into that contradiction emerges from experimental practice. The attempt to do democracy for democracy's sake reveals that the expressive value of democracy drives an inclusive reworking of constitutional essentials (1998, 329-30). According to Du Bois, the very formation of a racially inclusive constitutional democracy is an unprecedented “experiment” in the Americas (1998, 137, 306-8, 340). The attempt to incorporate former slaves into the polity as free and equal civic fellows—rather than expunge the

black American population through state-coerced colonial emigration—is “the maddest of experiments” (2007a, 25). Du Bois’s cheeky tone should not distract us from the weightiness of his claim. The ideal of inclusion *is* a moral innovation about who should count as a legitimate participant in democratic will formation, one that the U.S. polity is still struggling to enact, given voter and felon disenfranchisement, migrant labor policies, and gerrymandering. The polity does not appear keen on black insights into how best to learn the true meaning of its own ideals. Still Du Bois points to the considerable political successes spearheaded by the oppressed. Under the pressure of black counter-publics, the right to vote was a real win, including for poor white Southerners who had not insisted on it: “The Negro had widened democracy to include not only a goodly and increasing number of his own group but the mass of the poor white South” (Du Bois 2007b, 87).

The second lesson is that grassroots democratic practices in the black counter-public reimagined the public conception of the “common weal” (Du Bois 1999, 151). Du Bois defines the common good as a “balanced” representation of the “conflicting” interests among a voting constituency to reach a tentative “equilibrium” (1999, 145). Ideally, rulers should have an “unselfish devotion to the public good and knowledge of what that good calls for” (Du Bois 1999, 142). But no person could possess the relevant knowledge alone. In any case, there is no a priori answer to what should fall under the idea of the common good, much less a tentative “equilibrium” of changing, conflicting interests. One cannot fill out the idea of the common good without the deliberative inputs of the people, especially the historically excluded and oppressed. For this reason, democratic exchange best approximates a “balanced” representation.

But what does the right “balance” look like? For Du Bois, democracy’s experimental value supports innovation with respect to (a) the legitimate scope of democratic control in laboring

activities and (b) the democratic legitimation of new public goods.⁷ On both counts, experimental democratic practices and proposals push beyond accepted norms of governance. To wit, Du Bois highlights democratic experimentation whose innovation promotes an increase in the interdependent independence of laborers, mitigating their powerlessness in both productive and reproductive labor processes. In other words, democracy fails to achieve a “proportionate” representation of interests if it skirts labor rights, the forms of which I detail below (Du Bois 1999, 153). On my interpretation of Du Bois, these innovations in labor rights should be legally codified as constitutional protections for all, ideally forming the settled content of public political culture in the formal public sphere. The ideal of moral innovation is therefore still attached to that of inclusion to strengthen civic ties across color and gender lines and mold new constitutional protections.

With respect to (a), the broadening of who counts as a legitimate member of the voting public tends to reconfigure what might fall under the legitimate scope of democratic control. It should come as no surprise that new members of the polity bring new ideas, to which good rulers should pay attention. Namely, they should address the issues of “work and wages” that “touch the matters of daily life which are nearest to the interests of the people” (Du Bois 1999, 150). For the organization of labor “is an ethical and not a mere mechanical problem”; it “calls for grave public human judgment and not secrecy and closed doors” (Du Bois 1999, 158-59; Cf. Basevich 2020, 42-44). Du Bois thus defends the “free discussion and open determination of the rules of work and wealth and wages, on the ground,” challenging the capitalist ideology that in production “harsh natural law brooks no interference by Democracy” (1999, 157).

Invoking the unkept promise of Emancipation, he observes that after the U.S. Civil War

⁷ Chapters 6 and 7 of *Darkwater* are especially instructive.

black freedmen did not merely require the polity to apply constitutional protections to them, but to rethink what those protections should be. During the Reconstruction era, freedmen’s “attack” on “the land question” initiated a “revolution” in private property to promote workers’ democratic control of productive assets and capital:

There was a chance here to try democratic rule in a new way, that is, against the new industrial oppression with a mass of workers who were not yet in its control. With plenty of land widely distributed, staple products like cotton, rice, and sugar cane, and a thorough system of education, there was a unique chance to realize a new modern democracy in industry in the southern United States which would point the way to the world. This, too, if done by black folk, would have tended to a new unity of human beings and an obliteration of human hatreds festering along the color line. Efforts were begun. The 14th and 15th amendments gave the right to vote to white and black laborers, and they immediately established a public school system and began to attack the land question. The United States government was seriously considering the distribution of land and capital — ‘40 acres and a mule’—and the price of cotton opened an easy way to economic independence. Co-operative movements began on a large scale. (Du Bois 1999, 79-80)

In the passage above, Du Bois highlights black freedmen’s new take on an old ideal: liberty for all. The ballot is the *first* step in abolishing slavery; it cannot be the only nor the last step. Freedmen lacked the material condition for economic independence associated with their unmet call for ‘40 acres and a mule.’ As a result, they drifted towards “a second slavery” because the franchise alone was necessary but insufficient to achieve their productive independence (Du Bois 2007a, 11; Du Bois 1998, chp. 16). As the rustic ideal of yeoman farmsteads per household gave way to industrialization, the joint ownership and “cooperative” control of productive assets, such as land and capital, should have facilitated a “revolution” in private property.

Note that the critique of private property that the black freedmen proposed during the Reconstruction era is germane in the twentieth century and beyond. The joint ownership and cooperative control of productive assets is a promising—albeit untried—path for completing black civic enfranchisement because it would give productive laborers interdependent independence (Du Bois 1999, chp. 6). They can, then, produce use-value without being coerced into submission to

the owners of capital in production. Joint ownership and control of productive assets emerge as key lodestars for achieving free and equal civic standing. But the American public would need to accept that democracy should enter where the capitalist rulers of industry and the state don't want it to go: industry. For the polity to achieve a "balanced" conception of the common good—one that includes laborers' interest in interdependent independence—warrants unprecedented democratic experimentation still.

So too the right to vote alone is insufficient for delivering black women's enfranchisement without redressing their structural dependence as waged and unwaged caregivers. Du Bois is sensitive to the fact that black women were historically employed as domestic workers; they had to earn a living and could not rely on the income of partners or family members (Cf. Pascoe 2022; Davis 1983). They also had to care for their familial dependents. With respect to (b), women often worked together in their scarce free time to protect black family welfare via *community-based public care schemes*.⁸ In the early twentieth century U.S., black women emerged as civic leaders whose organizing around care work became essential for the survival and flourishing of black families. On account of their civic efforts, Du Bois observes that "in the[ir] great rank and file we have the up-working of new revolutionary ideals, which must in time have vast influence on the thought and action of this land" (1999, 185; Cf. Davis 1983). Their "new revolutionary ideals" did not expect "freedom and uplift" through entry into the black middle-class (Du Bois 1999, 178). An influx of wealth and economic opportunity alone would not ease black women's distinctive

⁸ Apart from their grassroots organizing informal networks of care, black domestic workers also organized strikes for higher wages, unions, and labor protections (Hunter 1995). And in their professional capacities, they also radically transformed the conditions of productive labor into which they were historically consigned, fighting racism and deepening accepted standards of excellence in healthcare, childrearing, and education. For further discussion, see (Hine 1989; Gamble 1995).

burden as caregivers. On the contrary, increased wages for (male) wage-earners would leave intact their caregiving roles inside and outside the home (Du Bois 1999, 181). In the light of black women's prospective enfranchisement, a reworked conception of the common good had to redress their peculiar bind. And so, they demanded productive independence as wage-earners who would not be forced back into the home to subsist on a partner's "family wage." Nor would they accept a version of productive independence that left them unable to see their own children. Substantive freedom for black working women exacts an interdependent independence as both waged laborers and unwaged caregivers inside their domestic circle. How might this be done?

Notably, black women initiated the *democratic legitimation of public goods* around care and social welfare, which I call reproductive assets (Higginbotham 1994; Hunter 1997; Basevich 2019). These assets include the material resources, public infrastructure, and forms of social and professional knowledge critical for effective care of those unable to care for themselves. Admittedly, black women's grassroots efforts unfolded largely behind the color line. But the ideals on which they relied were nevertheless "revolutionary" and, ultimately, adoptable—and should be adopted by—the American public. These ideals were embedded in civil associations that from the outside looking in—to the morally unlettered white gaze—did not appear to be political at all, much less a hotbed of "new revolutionary" ideals about the distribution of reproductive assets under a reworked conception of the common good.

Du Bois introduces his reader to black women's efforts behind the color line, though his observations are often cursory, fleeting sketches of their building counter-publics around care:

As I look about me today in this veiled world of 'mine, despite the noisier and more spectacular advance of my brothers, I instinctively feel and know that it is the five million women of my race who really count. Black women (and women whose grandmothers were black) are today furnishing our teachers; they are the main pillars of those social settlements which we call churches; and they have with small doubt raised three-fourths of our church property. If we have today, as seems likely, over a billion dollars of accumulated

goods, who shall say how much of it has been wrung from the hearts of servant girls and washerwomen and women toilers in the fields? As makers of two million homes these women are today seeking in marvelous ways to show forth our strength and beauty and our conception of the truth. (1999, 178)

Black feminist historians would later detail their efforts well beyond what Du Bois could have imagined.⁹ Writing about black women's civic efforts in the Jim Crow era in Atlanta, the historian Tera Hunter observes that "the development of private institutions became especially important to substitute for the public services that were denied to blacks by the white establishment" (1997, 130). She continues,

Their neighborhoods persisted as the launching pads for informal and formal collective action and mutual support, to meet the goals of mobilizing resources for daily sustenance and fighting against oppressive working and living conditions. Refusing to leave their fates entirely to the capricious market economy or to Jim Crow, black working-class women in Atlanta attacked persistent social and economic problems from every angle (1997, 131).

The historian Stephanie Shaw traces the "communal infrastructure" of black club women's associations to community ties forged on slave plantations and during the Reconstruction period (1995, 434-38; Cf. Cooper 1998, 216-23). Often embedded within the church, the black club women's movement, as well as mutual aid societies, appealed to the language of "self-help" and "uplift" to advocate—admittedly, sometimes in a paternalistic tone—the cultivation of individuals' virtues. Yet these associations gave material support to impoverished black families struggling to provide for children and dependents unable to care for themselves (Roberts 2005, 962-63). A prominent figure in the Black Club Women's Association, Mary Church Terrell states that the club movement: "would not only save the life, and preserve the health of many a poor little one, but it would speak eloquently of our interest in our sisters, whose lot is harder than our own,

⁹ Joy James (2007) asserts that Du Bois's limited perspective on sex and gender was not merely a reflection of the inevitable underdevelopment of his sociological and historical perspective, but a substantive problem of his reconciling his nominal feminist commitments with his lifelong ambivalence towards black women's command of political and intellectual leadership roles.

but to whom we should give unmistakable proof of our regard, our sympathy, and our willingness to render any assistance in our power” (Quoted from Roberts 2005, 970). In fact, Du Bois observes that with the enormous *sacrifice* of their limited money, time, and energy, professional and working-class black women facilitated the “freedom and uplift” of the segregated black community (1999, 178). The result, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham observes, is the founding of hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes, day nurseries, kindergartens, and public schools at all levels, in addition to community-based care networks that allowed black mothers to gain direct control over their children’s rearing (1994, 2, 53-55; Cf. Roberts 2005, 267-68; Gordon 1994, 114). They “reproduced in microcosm, all that great world from which the Negro is cut off by color-prejudice and social condition” (Du Bois 2007a, 158). Community control of care and reproductive assets was integral to the vision of black women’s leadership, and it did *not* feature in the white-controlled polity; it was their *moral innovation* that developed public political culture through their “collective reasons [...] forged in the process of struggling against injustice” (Ypi 2018, online).

Unfortunately, the polity has yet to follow black women’s lead to support community-based control of reproductive assets. In her canonical text, *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis reminds us that, “This is the challenge emanating from the swelling ranks of women in the working class. The demand for universal and subsidized childcare is a direct consequence of the rising number of working mothers” (243). A comprehensive picture of the black counter-public must deepen the public conception of the common good by learning from black women’s historical experience of asserting reproductive interdependent independence.¹⁰ Crucially, their perspective

¹⁰ In addition to care work, the history of black women’s activism in counter-publics includes programs around rudimentary poverty relief, education, and reproductive rights, expanding access for contraception and taboo medical knowledge about venereal disease. For further discussion, see (Gordon 1994, 125; Threadcraft 2016, 134-36; Basevich 2019, §3).

invites scrutiny into the organization of care work in the home, which whites predominantly regarded as a private matter, notwithstanding their reliance on black domestic workers. It cannot be overstated the extent to which the black feminist perspective that brought care work outside the home and subjected it to public scrutiny constitutes a moral innovation, then as now. Notably, the perspective rejects the “cult of domesticity” that delineates the “virtues” of (white) motherhood, but also creates the structural conditions for the exploitation of black domestic workers in white households (Du Bois 1999, 164; Gordon 111). Since black women had to work as both waged and unwaged caregivers, their leadership held that public support for labor rights, as well as the community control of care, is essential for good democratic rule.¹¹

In sum, black women leaders prioritized the alleviation of the burdens faced by waged and unwaged caregivers, a civic effort that remade the political culture of the black counter-public and today furnishes an experimental touchstone for the polity’s potential democratic development. The polity today can learn from their historical efforts at organizing a counter-public around care work. Public schemes of democratic governance should experiment in the adoption of *their ends* as a

¹¹ Linda Gordon provides historical context for the divergent outlooks of black feminist and white club women on the public organization of care work:

The greater black acknowledgment of the existence of working mothers shows in the high priority they gave to organizing “kindergartens” or day nurseries. In major cities throughout the country day care facilities were among the earliest projects of black women’s groups. Mary Church Terrell’s first publication was a speech she printed and sold for 25 cents a copy to help fund a kindergarten. In poor urban white neighborhoods, the need for childcare may have been nearly as great, but white activists gave the issue less attention. Few northern white welfare reformers even endorsed day care in principle until much later (the 1930s and 1940s); until then even the most progressive [...] usually opposed it even as a temporary solution, fearing that daycare would encourage the exploitation of women through low-wage labor. *The indifference to childcare among white reformers may have reflected the fact that most of the mothers among them had servants to care for their children; while black women, who were these servants (domestic service was the most common form of employment for black women), needed affordable care for their children if they had no nearby obliging relatives.* (1994, 136; emphasis added)

feature of the common good for the polity-at-large. For as the sociologist Dorothy Roberts notes, “The child welfare programs that Black women put in place [...] were more progressive than today’s child welfare system. These women had a better understanding of the social context of child maltreatment and more effective strategies for improving children’s welfare than do most policymakers today” (2005, 971). *All* caregivers regardless of their social identities would benefit from a democratically run, community-based public care scheme, even if such a scheme would still benefit most women of color. In other words, the ideal of moral innovation should welcome the democratic legitimation of indispensable reproductive assets in the polity-at-large. The experimental value of the democratic practices manifest in the black counter-public should ease the burden of all caregivers for whom reproduction extracts self-sacrifice.

4. Conclusion

This essay presents a Duboisian account of democracy’s expressive and experimental values and outlines the underlining ideals that these values support. I have argued that expression upholds the ideal of inclusion, whereas experimentation upholds that of innovation to reconstitute the common ends of a democracy. Drawing on a historical overview of the civic function of black American counter-publics, with the aid of Du Bois, I have illustrated that the grassroots democratic practices of the excluded have transformed public political culture and can still hasten the development of a nonideal republic. Struggling to see beyond the color line, white America has yet to learn how to govern better by incorporating the lessons of the black struggle (Du Bois 1998, 203; Moody-Adams 2022).

There is much left to say. Allow me to close with the observation that my Duboisian defense of democracy’s values and ideals highlights the role of democratic culture in the moral

education of the oppressed. While Du Bois rejects epistemological conditions for enfranchisement, he argues that experience and practice do prepare one to rule well. A “vast mine of knowledge” abides in the “heads and hearts” of the excluded (Du Bois 1999, 143). But the excluded only come to carry a unique moral insight, given their active participation in a counter-public. If I am right about this, then the implications for a Duboisian normative democracy theory are considerable. It indicates an alternative origin of the unique moral insight among the oppressed, one that is primarily attached to a localized *democratic culture*, rather than that of individual virtue, moral psychology, or experience-based standpoint epistemology. On my view, one’s uptake of these three items are shaped by the cultural norms and democratic practices to which one cleaves. In all likelihood, one will be as vicious or virtuous, gritty or reconciled, informed or ignorant as the public political culture in which one participates.

Given the robust civic function of black American counter-publics in the twentieth century, with Du Bois one can make the following inferences about the nature of the moral insights of its active participants. From the expressivist view, the moral insight of the oppressed is simply that the oppressed push to universalize the scope of codified constitutional protections. A polity often nominally endorses universal protections that it fails to implement in practice, including the right to political participation and equal civil rights. Second, the experimental value of democracy captures that the oppressed often offer a distinctive conception of the common good. In addition to universalizing the scope of accepted constitutional protections, the moral insight of the oppressed enriches the substantive ends of democratic governance, especially over productive and reproductive assets. It thereby reworks what a people might endorse as the legitimate terrain of democratic control and constitutional protections in the workplace, which is a grossly neglected site of social domination in liberal democracies. Du Bois thus discerns a far greater moral depth in

the black counter-public than denouncing white hypocrisy. The experimental moral power of the black historical struggle invites public scrutiny about what might yet be the legitimate common purpose of a free and equal democratic community.

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