

What is an Anti-Racist Philosophy of Race and History?
A New Look at Kant, Hegel, and Du Bois

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Abstract:

In this essay, I defend the pragmatic relevance of race in history. Kant and Hegel's racist development thesis assumes that nonwhite, non-European racial groups are defective practical agents. In response, philosophers have opted to drop race from a theory of history and progress. They posit that denying its pragmatic relevance amounts to anti-racist egalitarianism. I dub this tactic 'colorblind cosmopolitanism' and offer grounds for its rejection. Following Du Bois, I ascribe, instead, a pragmatic role to race in history. Namely, Du Bois argues that race is an 'instrument of progress' that advances emancipatory struggle. He appeals to the writing of history—or historiography—to cultivate group consciousness of historical memory in order to (1) strengthen intragroup bonds among the racially oppressed, especially black Americans and (2) to create intergroup bonds that reconstruct the republic on the basis of universal ideals. I detail Du Bois's defense of the black struggle for freedom in the wake of the U.S. Civil War to provide a concrete illustration of 'spirit' in American history.

Key words.

Du Bois, Kant, Hegel, progress, history, freedom, race, Reconstruction, slavery, colorblind cosmopolitanism

Introduction.

Kant and Hegel's views on race have become subject to critical scrutiny—no longer ignored as irrelevant elements of their philosophical systems. In formulating their philosophies of race and history, Kant and Hegel endorse the development thesis, the view that the implicit purpose of history is to actualize an "Infinite final End" or "Idea." On their formulation, the development thesis holds that non-European, nonwhite racial groups are stalled in their development as human

subgroups. Kant and Hegel maintain that nonwhite racial groups lack modern institutions and posit Europe as the paragon of modernity. Because European political history encapsulates the species' potential to be free, they hierarchically rank whites as exemplary and Black Africans and Native Americans as defective in the historical exercise of practical agency.ⁱ The development thesis thus tracks the apparent inferiority of nonwhite races as ineffective practical agents in the historical development of the species.

Kant and Hegel assume that people of color unsuccessfully exercise their capacity for self-determination. Their activities fail to amount to historical deeds that are worth remembering because they do not actualize the imperatives of freedom, which constitute the final end of history. Kant equates the imperatives of freedom with universal republican and cosmopolitan ideals, whereas Hegel identifies the imperatives of freedom with the achievement of 'Spirit,' in which a people promote a constitutional republic.ⁱⁱ Kant's biological theory of race is a cross between a natural history of the earth's geography, climate, and human physiology. Similarly, Hegel argues that nonwhite racial groups lack a political culture that evinces a self-conscious practical orientation towards freedom. The same Enlightenment philosophers who defend freedom and equality on principle also pioneer modern scientific racism rooted in racial biology. And so, the question of how to make sense of their racist pronouncement remains live.

In this essay, I propose a new interpretation of Kant and Hegel's racist development thesis, one that draws on W.E.B. Du Bois's original philosophy of race and history. Du Bois defends the pragmatic relevance of race in history, emphasizing the normative value of racial identity for emancipatory struggle. He turns to the writing of history—or historiography—as a way for racial groups to assert a distinct ethos for group consciousness of freedom. The practice of rewriting history, and strengthening collective historical memory, shapes the practical identity—or the

spirit—of a racial group. The pragmatic relevance of the concept of race, then, like Hegel’s concept of spirit, is a basis for group self-determination through historical time. Du Bois illuminates the systematic but overlooked black contribution to the historical development of the neophyte U.S. constitutional republic. He undertakes a revisionist history to recast black practical agency as the motor of progress in the wake of the U.S. Civil War. In this way, he treats race as an “instrument of progress,” which positions people of color within, rather than outside, of history; and he countenances that racial exclusion is the central obstacle to the advance of universal ideals in republics founded on a white supremacist monopoly on power and resources (1986, 817).

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I detail how race and racism figure in Kant and Hegel’s development thesis, before presenting Du Bois’s account of the pragmatic relevance of race in U.S. history. In Section I, I assess Pauline Kleingeld’s influential claim that the mature Kant of the mid-1790s abandons his racist views. Kleingeld’s defense of Kant favors what I call a *colorblind cosmopolitanism*, in which race holds no pragmatic relevance whatsoever. On her view, the mature Kant favors a purely physiological theory of race that is inconsequential in historical development (2014, 58, 64-5). In Section II, I scrutinize whether Hegel’s concept of spirit can capture the significance of race in history. Finally, in Section III, I defend Du Bois’s account of the pragmatic relevance of black racial consciousness. Du Bois’s theory of progress defends a historiography that positions African Americans as central to the development of the U.S. constitutional republic in the wake of the U.S. Civil War.

I. Kant’s Philosophy of Race and History: Why Colorblind Cosmopolitanism is Not Good Enough

Kant’s philosophy of race assesses the inherent ineptitude, as well as the suitability, of the human species to promote the requirements of morality and justice. To wit, his pragmatic

anthropology ascertains the effectiveness of the species to form constitutional republics, a hallmark of modernity. In his essays on race (1785-88) and in his lectures on anthropology and physical geography (1781-2), he considers race through the lens of natural science. Defending a monogenetic theory of race, he claims that all racial groups are members of the human species, descending from an “original phylum” (2013, 84-5, 199-200). In response to environmental pressures, the human species fractured into “seeds” (*Keime*) that formed “natural predispositions” (*Naturanlangen*) and racialized human biology (Kant 2013, 85). The biological formation of racial groups is irreversible and entails such heritable “racial” features, such as skin color and hair texture, to which Kant assigns a dysfunctional pragmatic relevance, namely, the deformation of character and intellect. His “natural history” of the “Negro,” “Red,” and “Yellow” races confirms a defective “pragmatic disposition” for modern statecraft (Kant 2013, 418-19).ⁱⁱⁱ Racial biology thus ranks races according to a “natural” disposition for modern politics.^{iv}

Kant scholars have tried to save Kant from himself by arguing that his philosophy of race contradicts his moral and political universalism. Prima facie, his defense of rational practical agency and public right, which are grounded in persons’ innate right to freedom, appear incompatible with his racist view. For example, in two well-known essays, Kleingeld objects that by the mid-1790s Kant has second thoughts that lead him to abandon his early racist view and discern the inconsistency between his universalism and his racial inequality (2007, 586-92; 2014, 52-58). She claims that Kant is an inconsistent universalist, rather than a consistent inequality, who eventually assigns equal juridical standing to all humans and supports peoples’ self-determination against colonial encroachment in a cosmopolitan condition (2007, 58). For the mature Kant, Europeans should not exploit peoples in foreign lands and should respect their cultural life forms. All peoples are entitled to territorial sovereignty over their lands and to political

self-determination.

There are at least two problems with Kleingeld's interpretation of Kant as an inconsistent universalist. First, it is not clear in what sense Kant's universalism "contradicts" his racist development thesis about how legislative reason becomes practically effective in historical time. For him, unequal development is a *natural fact* about the human species. His observations about race are supposed to "scientifically" or "empirically" confirm whether legislative reason is a practical success among humans. Race is a marker for a shared practical commitment to freedom, manifest in dominant social practices, namely, a modern political culture. One can "consistently" affirm universal ideals, while rejecting that nonwhite peoples have lived up to them as a matter of empirical fact.^v Therefore, the contention that persons of color have an innate right to freedom, and share an equal juridical standing in domestic and international law, does not by itself improve their inferior rank in a "scientifically established" racial hierarchy. In other words, for Kant, we can be juridical equals in an abstract sense—such that Europeans ought not take advantage of 'pastoral peoples'—and yet still assume that 'pastoral peoples' have failed to *exercise* an innate capacity for legislative reason in an "empirical" sense. Although humans comprise a reproductive species with an innate capacity for legislative reason, some racial groups are better prepared than others to exercise the latter capacity, and have made more significant contributions to realize universal ideals (Kant 2012, 274).^{vi}

One might object, with Kleingeld, that condemning the failure of peoples around the globe to enact the requirements of morality and justice is not in itself racist, inasmuch as it simply avows that ideals diverge from reality. But it is misguided to assume that one can condemn racial groups on the 'innocent' basis that morality and justice is hard for everyone. Consider the popular racist ideology of cultural racism. It denigrates nonwhite racial groups for possessing an 'inferior'

culture, and fosters a disdain against socializing, and sharing neighborhoods and resources, with black and brown persons. This racist ideology does not deny that all races are humans with basic moral entitlements. Rather, cultural racism accuses certain racial groups of ‘backwardness’ for an apparent collective neglect of morality and justice, or for an apparent failure to exemplify cultural excellence on account of a defective culture unworthy of esteem. Likewise, a monogenetic theory of race that concedes that all races are humans who ought to share a cosmopolitan condition does not necessarily override a racially denigrating outlook.

A second, related problem with Kleingeld’s interpretation is it endorses what I call *colorblind cosmopolitanism*. A colorblind cosmopolitanism, like colorblind racism, asserts that white and nonwhites are free and equal persons, but obscures that race and racism shapes the objective structure of the world and group consciousness. Tommie Shelby explains:

Advocates of colorblindness [...] argue that persons should be treated not as representatives of their race but instead as individuals. There are no group rights—only rights of individuals to equal treatment. However, the use of classifications and generalizations in law and public policy is ubiquitous, absolutely necessary, and entirely legitimate. Imagine trying to make policy or laws without relying on broad categories such as ‘persons over the age of y ’ or ‘persons who scored at least z on the exam.’ These classifications treat persons ‘as individuals’ no more than racial classifications do; and they do not presuppose that groups rather than individuals have rights. (2016, 31)

Racial categories have pragmatic significance because they highlight racial inequalities that would otherwise be missed without racial classifications that group individuals under the sociohistorical phenomena that have racialized them. Racial categories influence group self-awareness and create important normative resources for emancipatory struggle, namely, they afford the oppressed a shared foundation for cultural expression and for making political claims. For racial self-identification can function to motivate the struggle against racial exclusion and thereby advance the standing of all persons as free and equal. In contrast, a colorblind cosmopolitanism appears to drop race as a meaningful basis for understanding the modern world and for shaping group

consciousness. A colorblind cosmopolitanism fails to confront that in a modern world scarred by white supremacy, for better or for worse, racial consciousness builds robust intragroup bonds; race has profound pragmatic significance for the pursuit of cosmopolitan and republican ideals.^{vii} Of course, one can choose to act as an ‘individual’ for whom racial ascriptions ‘transcend’ one’s personal version reality—as in “I am ‘human’, not ‘white’!”—but such a colorblind stance is unhelpful for emancipatory struggle in the face of racial inequality. Indeed, it is hard to see how racial groups can dismantle racial inequality without group consciousness of their racialized social locations.

Kleingeld’s colorblind cosmopolitanism discounts the pragmatic relevance of race in the pursuit of cosmopolitan and republican ideals, and suggests instead that race is irrelevant for the practical advance of freedom vis-à-vis universal ideals (2014, 58, 64-5). Ergo, on her view, the mature Kant espouses a “purely physiological” view of race, in which race is *inconsequential* in modern history and politics. At best, race is a natural fact about biological differentiation, shaped by climate and geography. And yet, on her reading, natural facts have no political history. They are arbitrary physiological features that lump together individuals who share neither a political history nor a social location nor group consciousness. She thus defends universal cosmopolitan citizenship at the cost of turning a ‘blind’ eye to the normative salience of race in the modern world. People of color are, then, juridical equals in a cosmopolitan condition who just happen to share a ‘racial’ physiology—whatever that might be. And so, we must ask, is this the best that an anti-racist critique can do?

One might object that we must not superimpose a theory of race on an aggregate of disparate individuals. A colorblind cosmopolitanism that denies the pragmatic relevance of race is preferable to the far worse alternative of imputing an extraneous racial content to persons’ exercise

of free choice. Such a theoretical move suggests a familiar repulsive trope in which racial biology determines persons' temperament and intelligence. However, recognizing that racial difference can shape group consciousness and, in turn, impact political claims, does *not* undermine individuals' free choice or equal treatment. Rather Du Bois envisions that cultivating racial consciousness is useful for *promoting social reforms that expand persons' access to basic rights and opportunities in the context of profound racial inequality*. A group's self-awareness of their racial identity conditions the meaningful exercise of their practical agency; in its absence, a colorblind individual will be unable to recognize concrete obstacles to their freedom, especially if their race ascribes to them a subordinate social location.

Furthermore, in Kant's lifetime, as in the contemporary moment, colorblind cosmopolitanism neglects to challenge the implicit assumption that Whites are *bona fide* exemplars of modernity. The equal juridical standing of peoples does not entail that all racial groups enjoy reciprocal recognition of their practical identity as contributing to modern history and politics. The enlightened Kant bars whites from enslaving, colonizing, and taking advantage of distant peoples. However, *a colorblind cosmopolitanism can mask racial chauvinism*. Kleingeld's reconstructed Kant can maintain that nonwhite racial groups do not advance history on account of their accomplishment of historical deeds. That is, they remain *absent* from history. We must, instead, defend the goal of reciprocal recognition among racial groups, acknowledging that each group is an effective practical agent worthy of esteem and whose achievements advance history on the basis of universal ideals.

II. Hegel, Race, and the Writing of History

Like Kant, Hegel endorses a racist development thesis. In his lectures on history, Hegel asserts that African and Afro-descended peoples are steeped in a “natural spirit” (*Natürgeist*). He rejects that nonwhite racial groups contribute in any significant fashion to the actualization of universal ideals, claiming that Africans “do not have a history in the true sense of the word” and lack a self-conscious practical orientation towards freedom (1976, 190). But, in contrast to the mature Kant, Hegel does not regard race as a “natural” or “physiological” fact. Instead he projects an embryonic “natural spirit” on all peoples, such that a shared practical identity mediates every path forward in the development of world history. If we accept this premise, then we can appreciate that, in principle, all peoples can make a positive pragmatic contribution to history, and a racial consciousness can impact the development of history. This is the heart of the Du Boisian insight into the philosophy of history and race: the idea of racial difference—or the spirit that structures racial consciousness—can provide a normative foundation on which racial groups make political claims, advance universal ideals, and create history.

Hegel distinguishes the influence of nature on development from the idea of natural spirit. A group can hold either a “subjective” or an “external” relation to nature (Hegel 1976, 153). An external relation marks how geography and climate impacts social practices; for example, living on a coastline constrains whether or not a people become sea-faring. The idea of natural spirit, however, represents a nascent form of group consciousness, manifesting in dominant social practices. An external relation to nature is not a passive medium through which nature imprints its form; instead it is a necessary departure point for achieving a “particular and determinate” self-consciousness (Hegel 1976, 153). Natural spirit indicates an underdeveloped awareness of freedom inasmuch as a people take the natural world, e.g., the moon and stars, as relevant criteria for self-

determination. In the case of Africans, Hegel writes, spirit betrays a dependency on nature that resorts to “sorcery,” “superstition,” and “magic” to manipulate the natural environment.

Hegel’s racist development thesis contends that nonwhite, non-Europeans languish in natural spirit, unable to master cultural life forms that instantiate the requirements of morality and justice, or define a determinate spiritedness that reflect group consciousness of freedom. Natural spirit, for Hegel, becomes synonymous with racialized cultural backwardness. “Africa,” he comments, “is the continent in which [...] the principle of cultural backwardness predominates” (1976, 172). He continues, “differences in spiritual character remain tied to physical peculiarities” (1976, 173). African, indigenous, and Asian cultures are not realized “in practice,” but remain *in potentia*, thwarted by “natural peculiarity” (Hegel 1976, 172). In this respect, Hegel’s racist development thesis is more radical than Kant’s: he concurs that the development of the species is naturally unequal. He adds, however, that nonwhite racial groups manifest an “innocent” “animal-like” group consciousness. Contra Kant, he does not just seek empirical confirmation that the capacities of some racial groups are unrealized. He infers the capacities of some racial group are *permanently unrealizable* as spirit, that is, as group consciousness of freedom.

Yet, as we’ve seen, Hegel’s characterization of natural spirit cannot reduce race to arbitrary empirical facts. Nature cannot foreclose a group’s practical commitment to, or advance of, the imperatives of freedom.^{viii} In other words, there are no extrinsic barriers to the historical development of group consciousness of freedom (Kirkland 2017, 44-6). The concept of spirit must endorse the idea of human perfectibility in modern history. Hegel explains that “deeds” illustrate the “Spirit” of a people striving to be free:

It is the essence of Spirit to *act*, to make itself explicitly into what it already is implicitly—

to be its own deed, and its own work. Thus it becomes the object of its own attention, so that its own existence is there for it to be conscious of. That is the case with the Spirit of a people: it is a definite Spirit, one that builds itself up into an entire world, which subsists and persists, here and now, in its religion, its forms of worship, its customs, its forms of government and political laws, in the entire scope of its institutions, its deeds and events.

This is its work—it is what a people *is*. A people is what its deeds are. (1976, 77)

The historical accomplishment of deeds showcases a group “build[ing] itself up into an entire world” through its attachments, customs, and social arrangements. For group consciousness captures a distinct practical identity forged through historical efforts. As members of a social whole, individuals are located within a normative horizon in which reason-giving and sharing shape group consciousness in an ongoing fashion. Because the goal of spirit is to become “self-conscious,” spirit should not take any extrinsic standard to model its cultural integrity. For the Idea of freedom is not imposed from without on group consciousness. There is no final, one-size-fits-all institutional expression of the ongoing actualization of the Idea of freedom. Rather, historical development must track the radical specificity of diverse peoples’ cultural life forms through the historical achievement of deeds.

Reading Hegel against himself, Frank Kirkland notes that the race concept—and a racialized group consciousness—manifest and foster the achievement of historical deeds by all peoples around the globe (2017, 44). Because the goal of spirit is to become “self-conscious,” a people need not adopt European customs as an extrinsic standard for self-determination. In other words, “although the principle of th[e] exercise [of collective self-determination] has its origins in Europe, it is not distinctly European, because its validity cannot be measured by its point of origin” (Kirkland 1993, 161). Rather, a people achieve self-consciousness as free by asserting what *they*

judge to be normatively salient attachments, customs, and social arrangements. This does not mean, however, that modernity devolves into relativistic claims about incommensurable cultural life forms. That would imply a developmental *stasis*, in which all peoples stand inert and history ends. Instead, though Hegel refuses to do so, we can reconstruct a racially egalitarian philosophy of history that posits a theory of progress, drawing on the positive pragmatic significance of racial consciousness in history. Racial groups achieve history—and refine self-consciousness—through the accomplishment of deeds.

Rather than assume Kleingeld's colorblind cosmopolitanism in which race plays no meaningful role in history, Du Bois defends a historiography that *illuminates* the historical achievement of deeds among diverse racial groups. Indeed, Du Bois stresses that we cannot “write universal history [that] leaves out Africa” and Afro-descendent peoples (1910, 5). All peoples then, including African and Afro-descendent peoples, assert their character and cultural integrity, even if Hegel was dumb to this possibility. Specifically, we can appeal to the cultivation and writing of historical memory to illustrate how racial attachments can and should orient group consciousness and motivate collective judgment and action (Cf. Kirkland 2017, 44).

Du Bois argues that the writing of history, or historiography, best captures group consciousness of freedom in its external aspect, that is, in dominant social practices that shape the practical identity of a people. For historiography is not just the empirical confirmation of one thing happening after another (Hegel 1976, 60). Written histories clarify a people's values and offer public recognition of the historical efforts that actualized them. Du Bois was acutely aware that the politics of controlling history mirrors the racial politics of whose life matters in the public's eye.^{ix} Sound historiographical practice should facilitate reciprocal recognition among racial groups whose efforts contributed to the practical advance of freedom for all.

III. Du Bois on Race and Modern American History

Du Bois argues that all peoples, including African and Afro-descended peoples, are self-determining practical agents and are defective in neither physiology nor culture, but are in the historical process of shaping themselves into a social whole under “universally binding directives” or “ideals” (Du Bois 1986; Hegel 1976, 65). He refashions the development thesis to defend the pragmatic relevance of race in world history. In particular, in his work as an American historian, he showcases the prodigious but derogated contributions of African Americans to American history, foregrounding the black-American struggle against slavery.^x He appeals to historical memory to cultivate group consciousness in order to (1) strengthen intragroup bonds among black Americans and (2) to create intergroup bonds among the American people as a whole to reconstruct the republic using universal ideals.

To be sure, in his early years, Du Bois viewed Europe as a paragon of modernity, one that he sought to emulate in the figure of German Emperor Otto von Bismarck.^{xi} I submit, however, that his turn to rewriting U.S. history indicates a rejection of Eurocentric standards for evaluating modernity. Instead, he defends the formation of a distinct peoples (both black Americans and Americans as such) in the reconstruction of the U.S. republic. He looks to the African-American community as advocating ideals that destroyed a slavocracy and established a constitutional republic in its wake. His historiography of the U.S. thus highlights the achievement of black historical deeds as central to the idiosyncratic narrative of what it means to be Black and to be an American.

i. Black Racial Consciousness as Shared Practical Identity or ‘Spirit’

In his much-discussed essay “The Conservation of Races,” which he delivered as a speech

at the American Negro Academy in 1896, Du Bois argues that physical differences alone cannot explain “spiritual differences” among racial groups, but those spiritual differences should be “conserved” to deliver a “particular message” to the world. A racial group, he explains, carries an ideal that shapes the practical identity or spirit of a people (1986, 817). A racial ideal is a “peculiar principle” that tracks a racial group’s “inner thought” and characterizes its “spiritual” life (1986, 817). This peculiar principle outlines “a distinct sphere of action and an opportunity for race development” (Du Bois 1986, 817). For Du Bois, African and African-American culture, religion, and customs have a universal character and posit an as-yet unrealized ideal for the future—a “message” that has yet to be “delivered.”

And what is the message? At a minimum, it is the message that African and Afro-descendent peoples have strived and will continue to strive for freedom.^{xiii} Du Bois claims that group striving for freedom captures a “racial” illustration of an “ideal of life.”^{xiii} Racial consciousness functions as a vehicle for sustaining in-group affiliation on the basis of a shareable reason for judgment and action grounded in an ideal. To the extent that the ideal of freedom mediates self-consciousness among racial groups, racial difference can and should function as a mechanism for historical development. Du Bois thus affirms that racial identity is not a static object, but a dynamic and unstable practical orientation “infinitely transcending” human physiology.

Du Bois’s historiography preserves black historical memory and showcases that black racial consciousness tracks group consciousness of—and striving for—freedom. As we’ve seen, Hegel rejects that the group consciousness of African and Afro-descendant persons can ever represent a self-conscious striving for freedom, much less be preserved in cultural life forms. To be sure, Hegel argues that customs are the means through which groups shape their subjective

sense of practical agency through historical time. Culture educates individuals—mediates the subjective will via group consciousness—so that groups can advance universal ideals to reconstitute themselves and the world in perpetuity. A people’s culture or spirit is “the distinct particularity [that] actually constitutes the characteristic principle of a people” (Hegel 1976, 67). Du Bois challenges Hegel’s formulation of spirit to capture black striving for freedom in the light of racial exclusion and denigration. For example, despite harrowing circumstances, Du Bois details that slavery elicited cultural responses that represent a self-conscious striving for freedom, which was preserved in African-American cultural artefacts, such as song, literature, and dance. Contra Hegel, African-American culture is not a living fossil of a subhuman race or a natural spirit lagging behind Anglo-European worldliness. The ideal of freedom is vital in black historical development and establishes that African and Afro-descended peoples are *within* world history, not outside of it, entrapped in nature. In fact, black cultural life structured group subjectivity to foment uprisings. In *Black Reconstruction*, he identifies the general strike among slaves as the first instance of a republican ideal of freedom inching toward realization in the neophyte republic (1992, chp. 1). A vibrant political culture among the enslaved established a normative foundation for struggle that precipitated emancipation.

Moreover, rewriting American history to showcase black deeds can protect black normative self-understanding in the context of ongoing racial exclusion and denigration. The writing and cultivation of black historical memory structured group consciousness in circumstances that aimed to annihilate black Americans’ subjective sense of entitlement to freedom. Du Bois hopes that a historiography of black deeds can continue to strengthen intragroup bonds, and bolster positive intragroup self-understanding, for the U.S. republic still stands as an obstacle, rather than a bulwark, to the exercise of black practical agency.

In a reworked development thesis, Du Bois maintained that black historical memory can bolster the resolve among black Americans to keep fighting for freedom in the face of perpetual losses. For it impresses on group consciousness how much work must still be done. He notes that the “soul” and “striving” of his people reveals *unrealized* hopes for a better future in the aftermath of slavery, the failure of Reconstruction, and the emergence of Jim Crow (Kirkland 1993, 156). To be sure, anyone can choose to join an emancipatory struggle, but a common historical memory is more likely to motivate one to do so. After all, members of a vulnerable racial group tend to stand in the same relation to the past, on the same side of the color line, and often have restricted access to rights and resources that continue to crush one’s aspiration. A shared historical memory can sharpen the psychological feeling of self-worth and personal power, notwithstanding one’s subordinate social location. In other words, historical memory is a unique source of strength: it can impart tenacity, even as it points to the accumulation of brutal losses. Unfortunately, an oppressed people’s own history can be suppressed and belittled. Du Bois uses historiography to shape black racial consciousness and strengthen intragroup solidarity among a beleaguered people.

The recent controversies about Confederate monuments in the U.S. underscore the power of historical memory to mobilize racial groups. Some Whites’ sense of self-worth remains tied to honoring a slavocracy. This is why historical memory alone is insufficient to mediate subjective will formation in group consciousness, and must instead be articulated through a universal ideal that aspires to actualize the freedom of all. Historical memory can be abused to *narrow* the scope of civic concern. A racial group’s drive for power and belonging can subvert the universal ideals that underlie a constitutional republic. As I explain below, by acknowledging the black contribution to American history, the polity can learn to forge intragroup political bonds across the color line.

ii. Black Racial Consciousness as Impetus of Modern American History

Du Bois argues that a racial ideal shapes group consciousness, which, in turn, spurs the universally binding directives that make progress possible. A racial ideal can restructure the republic, not just motivate the practical agency of a particular racial group. The modern concept of race thus functions as an “instrument of progress” (1986, 817-19).^{xiv} Though Du Bois emphasizes that black historical memory should forge intragroup bonds in the black-American community in the face of ongoing racial denigration and exclusion, he also emphasizes that the historical accomplishment of black deeds should be recognized as *the common political heritage* of the republic. Publicly honoring black historical memory can help create *intergroup bonds* among the American people and establish a public commitment to reconstruct the republic. Du Bois is keen to assert that he is Black *and* that he is an American, with a stake in the fate of the republic, and that all groups should help carry the burden of instantiating progress in the polity.

Racial identity—and its “ideals”—function as *both* a vehicle for in-group affiliation and as an instrument of progress. The pragmatic significance of black American identity in history is inward-oriented: it captures and strengthens intragroup bonds that shape black racial consciousness. But the pragmatic significance of race is also outward-oriented, inasmuch as it encourages people to confront racial inequality and form racially pluralistic intergroup bonds on the basis of universal ideals. Du Bois envisions that racial equality nurtures social harmony through racial differentiation; and he prioritizes the ongoing reciprocal recognition of historically actualized difference (Jeffers 2013, 414-22). He observes that while black Americans should resist absorption into “white America,” they also make a “peculiar contribution [...] to the culture of their common country” (1986, 61).

Against popular histories that lamented the historical role of African Americans as disastrous, Du Bois affirms that American modernity is a sui generis *black* historical achievement and ought to be recognized as such. He emphasizes the pragmatic relevance of black racial consciousness in restructuring a constitutional republic in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War. Slaves' assertion of an inalienable entitlement to freedom in the general strike was the impetus for the creation of a centralized constitutional state during the Reconstruction era (Du Bois 1992, 50). Preserving the historical memory of this unprecedented deed upends the assumption that Blacks are somehow culturally defective as a people. Instead, Du Bois encourages Americans to have a broader appreciation of the myriad black historical contributions that helped create modern American political culture:

We are the people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairytales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy. As such, it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development. (Du Bois 1986, 58)

The black racial ideal thus interpenetrates the development of modern American political culture. Du Bois asserts that if other groups remember the black historical contribution, it can create political bonds in support of universal ideals to which all groups ought to commit. The rebuilding of a republic is political task in which, ideally, all ought to contribute and reciprocally recognize the value of each other's contributions. For at the very core of what it means to be an American lie distinct, intersecting racial contributions that dislodge the assumption that whites are the only 'real'

Americans.

To the extent that white America resents that a black racial ideal interpenetrates the republic, then it suggests a persistent unwillingness to share power and resources. For this reason, Du Bois's historical revisionism stresses the public recognition of the black contribution to American history, as it better prepares white America to commit to universal ideals to restructure the republic and dismantle racial inequality. The desire to suppress the black historical contribution often buttresses a white supremacist monopoly on power and resources. Du Bois thus asserts his stake as a civic equal in the U.S. republic. He asks, "Your country? How come it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. [O]ur gift of the Spirit [has not] been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the warp and woof of this nation,--we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded [for] Justice, Mercy, and Truth[.] Are not these gifts worth giving? Would American have been America without her Negro people?" (2007, 97). In posing the rhetorical question to a silent reader, he commands his reader to remember what actually happened: the death white America wrought and forgot, the black bodies it mutilated and mutilates still, because they called for freedom. And call still.

IV. Conclusion

This essay surveys what role—if any—the concept of race can play in a philosophy of history in Kant, Hegel, and Du Bois. I reject the position of colorblind cosmopolitanism that assumes that race must be immaterial in a racially egalitarian theory of development. Following Du Bois, I defend the positive pragmatic significance of race in history and use his revisionist approach to American history as a case study. Du Bois illustrates that black-American deeds spurred the formation of a constitutional republic and a modern political culture in the U.S. Black

historical memory affords a positive normative self-understanding to a historically derogated racial group. Du Bois adds that public recognition of black deeds can also function as an instrument of progress against a white-supremacist polity. He reworks the development thesis to provide an original theory of progress grounded in racialized group consciousness of, and striving for, freedom.

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ⁱ There is a rich growing literature about Kant's theory of race. See: (Lu-Adler, forthcoming; Basevich 2020; Mensch 2017a, 2017b; Valdez 2017; Bernasconi 2001; Louden 2000). For representative literature on Hegel and race, see (Stone 2017; Zambrana 2017; Kirkland 2017).

ⁱⁱ Due to space constraints, I do not detail the differences between Kant and Hegel's conceptions of the ideals that constitute the final end of history; it is not necessary for the purpose of my argument, which chart how race mediates the historical pursuit of universal ideals.

ⁱⁱⁱ These are the relevant four races Kant lists in his lectures (2013, 320-21; 2012, 197).

^{iv} Louden helpfully notes "A study of the character of the human races construed as a 'products of the play of nature' means that what is supposedly being studied is not moral character but physical characteristics. Moral character, again, concerns 'what the human being makes of himself' (*Anth* 7:292). Race would seem to be a paradigm instance of what 'nature makes of the human being' (7:292)" (2000, 94).

^v Cf. (Bernasconi 2011, esp. 308-11).

^{vi} Cf. Kant's discussion of active and passive citizenship in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant's racist development thesis complements his rationalization of social inequality via passive citizenship for marginalized social groups, including wage-laborers and women.

^{vii} In *Darkwater*, Du Bois notes that white consciousness tends to support a monopoly on power and resources, whereas he defends an 'emancipatory' black racial consciousness to secure rights

and resources on the basis of the universal ideal of freedom for all. Whether for better or for worse, one must confront, rather than ignore, the pragmatic relevance of race in history.

^{viii} Cf. (Kirkland 2017, 44-46). So too Du Bois asserts that Africa must be “an integral part of the great movement of world history. Yet it is true that the history of Africa is unusual, and its strangeness is due in no small degree to the physical peculiarities of the continent” (2001, 5).

Thanks to Robert Williams for bringing this passage in *The Negro* to my attention.

^{ix} Du Bois completes his magnum opus *Black Reconstruction* to refute the then-dominant “Dunning school” that argued that black Emancipation “ruined” American democracy.

^x Save for scattered remarks, Du Bois overlooks indigenous efforts at self-determination in the Americas during the colonial and postbellum period, during which the U.S. inflicted genocidal violence and established colonial rule.

^{xi} His early fondness for Bismarck is perhaps most evident in his commencement address at Fisk in June 1888.

^{xii} Cf. (Harris 2019, 678).

^{xiii} His approach to historiography centers racial consciousness and differentiation as the motor for the advance of universal ideals: “If this be true, then the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history” (Du Bois 1986, 816-17).

^{xiv} Cf. (Jeffers 2017, 222–55).