

W. E. B. Dubois: Remembrance of His Berlin Years (1892–94)

Abstract

W. E. B. Dubois (1868–1963), the famous sociologist who was the first African-American to obtain a Ph.D. from Harvard University, spent two years studying at the University of Berlin. Whereas his observations on German academic life may seem familiar, his reflections on the relative openness of German society are more surprising. On the whole, his reception in Germany served in contradistinction to the racism he felt at home.

Source

CHAPTER X

EUROPE 1892 TO 1894

[...]

Between the years 1885 and 1894 I received my education at Fisk University, Harvard College and the University of Berlin. It was difficult for me at the time to form any critical estimate of any meaning of the world which differed from the conventional unanimity about me. Apparently one consideration alone saved me from complete conformity with the thoughts and confusions of then current social trends; and that was the problem of racial and cultural contacts. Otherwise I might easily have been simply the current product of my day. Even as it was, the struggle for which I was preparing and the situations which I was trying to conceive and study, related themselves primarily to the plight of the comparatively small group of American Negroes with which I was identified, and theoretically to the larger Negro race. I did not face the general plight and conditions of all humankind. That I took for granted, and in the unanimity of thought and development of that day, as I saw it, this was scarcely to be wondered at.

[...]

Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshipper at the shrine of the established social order and of the economic development into which I was born. But just that part of this order which seemed to most of my fellows nearest perfection, seemed to me most inequitable and wrong; and starting from that critique, I gradually, as the years went by, found other things to question in my environment.

[...]

In the days of my formal education, my interest became concentrated upon the race struggle. My attention from the first was focused on democracy and democratic development; and upon the problem of the admission of my people into the freedom of democracy. This my training touched but obliquely. We studied history and politics almost exclusively from the point of view of ancient German freedom, English and New England democracy, and the development of the white United States. Here, however, I could bring criticism from what I knew and saw touching the Negro.

Europe modified profoundly my outlook on life and my thought and feeling toward it, even though I was there but two short years with my contacts limited and my friends few. But something of the possible beauty and elegance

of life permeated my soul; I gained a respect for manners. I had been before, above all, in a hurry. I wanted a world, hard, smooth and swift, and had no time for rounded corners and ornament, for unhurried thought and slow contemplation. Now at times I sat still. I came to know Beethoven's symphonies and Wagner's *Ring*. I looked long at the colors of Rembrandt and Titian. I saw in arch and stone and steeple the history and striving of men and also their taste and expression. Form, color and words took new combinations and meanings.

[...]

On mountain and valley, in home and school, I met men and women as I had never met them before. Slowly they became, not white folks, but folks. The unity beneath all life clutched me, I was not less fanatically a Negro, but "Negro" meant a greater, broader sense of humanity and world fellowship. I felt myself standing, not against the world, but simply against American narrowness and color prejudice, with the greater, finer world at my back.

In Germany in 1892, I found myself on the outside of the American world, looking in. With me were white folk—students, acquaintances, teachers—who viewed the scene with me. They did not always pause to regard me as a curiosity, or something sub-human; I was just a man of the somewhat privileged student rank, with whom they were glad to meet and talk over the world; particularly, the part of the world whence I came.

I found to my gratification that they, with me, did not regard America as the last word in civilization. Indeed, I derived a certain satisfaction in learning that the University of Berlin did not recognize a degree even from Harvard University, no more than Harvard did from Fisk. Even I was a little startled to realize how much that I had regarded as white American, was white European and not American at all: America's music is German, the Germans said; the Americans have no art, said the Italians; and their literature, remarked the English, is mainly English. All agreed that Americans could make money and did not care how they made it. And the like. Sometimes their criticism got under even my anti-American skin, but it was refreshing on the whole to hear voiced my own attitude toward so much that America had meant to me.

[...]

Of greatest importance was the opportunity which my *Wanderjahre* in Europe gave of looking at the world as a man and not simply from a narrow racial and provincial outlook. This was primarily the result not so much of my study, as of my human companionship, unveiled by the accident of color. From the days of my later youth in the South to my boarding a Rhine passenger steamer at Rotterdam in August 1892, I had not regarded white folk as human in quite the same way that I was. I had reached the habit of expecting color prejudice so universally, that I found it even when it was not there. So when I saw on this little steamer a Dutch lady with two grown daughters and one of 12, I proceeded to put as much space between us as the small vessel allowed. But it did not allow much, and the lady's innate breeding allowed less. Soon the little daughter came straight across the deck and placed herself squarely before me. She asked if I spoke German; before I could explain, the mother and other daughters approached and we were conversing.

Before we reached the end of our trip, we were happy companions, laughing, eating and singing together, talking English, French and German and viewing the lovely castled German towns. Once or twice when the vessel docked for change of cargo, the family strolled off to visit the town. Each time I found excuse to linger behind and visit alone later; until once at Düsseldorf, all got away before I sensed it and left me and the prettiest daughter conversing. Then seeing we had docked she suggested we follow and see the town. We did; and thereafter we continued acting like normal well-bred human beings. I waved them all good-bye, in the solemn arched aisles of the Cologne Cathedral, with tears in my eyes.

So too in brave old Eisenach, beneath the shadow of Luther's Wartburg, I spent a happy holiday in a home where university training and German home-making left no room for American color prejudice. From this unhampered social intermingling with Europeans of education and manners, I emerged from the extremes of my racial provincialism. I became more human; learned the place in life of "Wine Women, and Song"; I ceased to hate or suspect people simply because they belonged to one race or color; and above all I began to understand the real meaning of scientific research and the dim outline of methods of employing its technique and its results in the new social sciences for the settlement of the Negro problems in America.

[...]

In the Fall I went up to Berlin and registered in the university. In my study, I came in contact with several of the great leaders of the developing social sciences: in economic sociology and in social history. My horizon in the social sciences was broadened not only by teachers, but by students from France, Belgium, Russia, Italy and Poland.

For matriculation in groups of 100 we went into a large room with a high ceiling ornamented with busts of Berlin's famous professors. The year's Rector Magnificus was the widely famous Rudolf Virchow. He was a meek and calm little man, white-haired and white-bearded, with kindly face and pleasant voice. I had again at Berlin as at Harvard, unusual opportunity. Although a foreigner, I was admitted my first semester to two seminars under Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, both of them at the time the most distinguished men in their lines; I received eventually from both of them pleasant testimony on my work in economics, history and sociology. I sat under the voice of the fire-eating Pan-German, Heinrich von Treitschke; I heard Max Weber; I wrote on American agriculture for Schmoller and discussed social conditions in Europe with teachers and students. Under these teachers and in this social setting, I began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the political development of Europe as one. I began to unite my economics and politics; but I still assumed that in these groups of activities and forces, the political realm was dominant. Here are comments I made at the time:

[...]

"To me by far the most interesting of the professors is the well-known von Treitschke, the German Machiavelli. He never comes to his lectures until very late, often commencing his ten o'clock lecture on *Politik* at 10:30—never before 10:20. [...]

"His entrance is always the same. He comes in slowly, somewhat out of breath, with his overcoat, hat, and cane on his left arm. These he hangs on the wall and ascends to his desk where he stands as he speaks. He then takes off his right glove and putting his head a bit on one side says: '*Meine Herren*' with a falling inflection. Then begins the lecture, which, as I overheard a puzzled and sighing American say, 'has but one period and that's at the end.' He does not speak so fast, but his articulation is bad (imagine badly articulated German!) and he has a way of catching his breath in the midst of his sentences instead of at the end, giving the ear no natural pause."

"His lectures are nevertheless intensely interesting. He is rapt in his subject, a man of intense likes and dislikes, beliefs and disbeliefs. He is the very embodiment of united monarchical, armed Germany. He has pity for France, hearty dislike for all things English—while for America, well, the United States is his *bête noire*, which he seldom fails to excoriate. One day he startled me by suddenly declaring during a lecture on America: '*Die Mulatten sind niedrig! Sie fühlen sich niedrig.*' [Mulattoes are inferior; they feel themselves inferior.] I felt as if he were pointing me out; but I presume he was quite unaware of my presence. However my presence or absence would have made no difference to him. He was given to making extraordinary assertions out of a clear sky and evidently believing

just what he said. My fellow students gave no evidence of connecting what he said with me. Yet von Treitschke was not a narrow man. His outlook is that of the born aristocrat who has something of the Carlyle contempt of levelling democracy. On the other hand he criticizes his own government and nation unsparingly when he sees fit—I have heard him characterize one of the highest officials as a *verrückte Dummkopf* [mad idiot] while the students cheered. [...]

“The difference in general appearance between the Berlin student and his Harvard brother is very marked. The Harvard man affects a slouchy stride, jams his hands in his pockets, dresses well, and yet with a certain conscious carelessness; and would appear as a sort of devil-may-care young fellow, out of swaddling clothes but not yet in straitjacket. The Berlin student affects a strut, never uses his trouser pockets or whistles in public, dresses poorly but with a certain primness of collar, gloves, and cane; and would appear as a young man of intellect, promise, and present importance. A crowd of German students is more picturesque.”

“In social life particularism is more marked here than even at Harvard. The simpleton who asks: ‘Well, how about the social life of the Harvard students?’ should be questioned in turn: ‘Which Harvard students?’ So in Berlin. Most of the students have spent their *kneipe* [carousing] years elsewhere and come here if not for more serious, at least for a different sort of play. The *Verbindungen* [student associations] do not consequently play so much of a role here as elsewhere.”

[...]

The pageantry and patriotism of Germany in 1892 astonished me. In New England our patriotism was cool and intellectual. Ours was a great nation and it was our duty to preserve it. We “loved” it but with reason not passion. In the South, Negroes simply did not speak or think of patriotism for the nation which held their fathers in slavery for 250 years. On the other hand we revered rebels like Robert Dale Owen, Henry George or Edward Bellamy. When I heard my German companions sing “*Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt*” I realized that they felt something I had never felt and perhaps never would. The march of soldiers, the saluting of magnificent uniforms, the martial music and rhythm of movement stirred my senses.

[...]

The many vacations of the academic year I used for trips in Germany and to other parts of Europe; but I missed after the summer in Eisenach, the companionship of close friends. I kept up my older habit of traveling alone.

I had some student companionship in Germany and might easily have had more. I was invited to join a *Gesellschaft* for study of comparative international law; I found there some good companions and we talked and published a set of by-laws. To this we added a song book, to which at unanimous request I added a translation of the then popular “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!” Nevertheless I took my first excursion alone and chose the Hansa cities of northwest Germany. I planned this trip for March, but before leaving there came my 25th birthday on February 23. I asked in no companions.

It was in the long, dark winter of northern Germany, and while I was comfortable, I felt a little lonesome and far away from home and boyhood friends. [...]

The Christmas holidays of 1893 I spent in making a trip through south Germany. Three of us visited Weimar, Frankfurt, Heidelberg and Mannheim. From Christmas Day to New Year’s we stopped in a little German “Dorf” in the Rheinpfalz, where I had an excellent opportunity to study the peasant life closely and compare it with country life in the South. Three of us started out—a Scotsman, an American and myself. The American was descended

from German immigrants to the United States and had relatives in the Rhineland in Southwest Germany. We spent Christmas in the village of Gimmeldingen. What a lovely holiday, visiting and feasting among peasant folk who treated me like a prince! We visited perhaps 20 different families, talked, ate and drank new wine with them; listened to their gossip, attended their social assemblies, etc. The bill which my obsequious landlord presented on my departure was about one-tenth of what I expected. [...]

Later we decided to go down to Italy; to Genoa, Rome and Naples and then over to Venice and Vienna and Budapest. [...]

I came back to Berlin by way of Prague and Dresden and started my third and final semester. Schmoller wanted to present me for my doctorate, despite the fact that I had not finished the "triennium" required in a German university and my work at Harvard was not recognized. The faculty was willing in my case but was restrained by the professor of English who threatened to push the similar claims of several Britishers. I therefore regretfully had to forego the chance of a German doctorate and wait for the degree from Harvard.

As a farewell to Germany, I made the *Harzreise* in the Spring of 1894. Again, I went alone, but with my now familiar German and wide experience of travel, I felt at home. I kept no diary of this trip, but started west from Berlin to Magdeburg and Halberstadt in Saxony. I passed the splendid seat of the Prince zu Steinberg-Wernigerhede. Then I climbed to the Brocken and lived Walpurgis night again; I forded streams and climbed mountains until in full darkness I came to an old inn. I ordered beer and *Kalbsbraten* and dined alone. This was my perfect farewell to a Germany which no longer exists. [...]

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