

REASONED PREJUDICE: W.E.B DU BOIS ON ANTI-SEMITISM IN NAZI
GERMANY, 1936

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

W.E.B Du Bois is arguably the most famous African-American scholar and political activists of the Twentieth century. Despite a resurgence of academic interest in Du Bois' expansive body work in recent decades, it remains a little known fact that this anti-racism crusader spent five-months in Hitler's Capital in 1936, which happened to have coincided with Jesse Owen's heroic performance at the notorious "Nazi Olympics."

Although Du Bois published a weekly column in the *Pittsburgh Courier* throughout his five-months sojourn in Nazi Germany in 1936, he had to keep silent about what he really saw there. As soon as he left the Nazi state, however, he broke his silence on Hitler's totalitarian regime and anti-Semitism, in a series of five weekly columns. This paper will focus on this series of columns, written about Nazi Germany, and published immediately following Du Bois' departure from it. My research question is how does Du Bois describe Anti-Semitism in Germany to his African-American readers? And how does his analysis of Anti-Semitism help us to better understand Du Bois' comprehension of racial-antagonism as a general social phenomenon, when he faced with a peculiar case study in which victim and perpetrator are on the same side of the color-line.

While a few scholars mentioned in brief Du Bois' palpable outrage by what he had witnessed in Berlin, a close reading reveals his struggle to explain, or even fully comprehend, race prejudice that does not cross the color-line.

Wavering between comparing German-Jews' predicament to that of African-Americans', and claiming that the situations are "not at all analogous," Du Bois' analysis is replete with contradictions, gaps, and slippages. His ambiguous position is aptly summed up by his claim that "race prejudice in Germany...is not instinctive prejudice, except in the case of the Jews, and not altogether there...It is reasoned prejudice, or an economic fear." But could there really be such a thing as '*reasoned prejudice*'?

I argue that this oxymoron lies at the core of Du Bois' ultimate failure to analyze Nazi Anti-Semitism, which stemmed from his inability to fully comprehend race prejudice that is not marked by skin color. I will prove my argument by performing a close-reading of Du Bois' 1936 columns about Germany, focusing specifically on his third column, which was devoted in its entirety to Anti-Semitism. I will point out the contradictions between Du Bois' explicit assertion that Nazi Anti-Semitism and American Anti-Blackness are qualitatively different, and the implicit message that slips between the cracks of his language, that the two are essentially similar. I will also use other texts written by Du Bois around the same time as an aid to decode some of the terms he uses, which will further underscore the incompatibility of his analysis of Anti-Semitism with his own understanding of race and race prejudice at large.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Neta Goder was born in Haifa, Israel in 1981. She has gained two undergraduate degrees, in Psychology, and in Medical Sciences, from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, before taking a sharp turn towards history a few years later.

It was the love of music that propelled her to study African-American history.

Invigorated by her studies at department of History at Tel-Aviv University, she enrolled for a PhD program at Cornell University, where she studies and taught for four years, and decided to pursue a terminal M.A. and try her luck in the realm that brought her to study history in the first place – music.

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1936, African-American track and field athlete, Jesse Owens, made history when he won four gold medals in— what came to be remembered as— “the Nazi Olympics.” Turning on its head Hitler’s plan for using the Olympic games as a spectacle of Aryan racial superiority, Owens became an overnight American hero. For African-Americans, Owens’ success was perceived as a double-victory against White Supremacy at home and overseas. Upon Owens’ hero’s welcome in America, the media was eager to hear of his experience as a black man in Hitler’s Berlin. “The treatment they gave us could not have been better,” Owens told the press. “There was absolutely no discrimination at all. Everyone was friendly to me, and our athletes were accorded the greatest ovation I ever heard when we arrived in Germany.” African-American journalists echoed a similar sentiment in their reports from Berlin. “There was no race prejudice to be seen anywhere,” wrote Robert C. Vann, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one the three major African-American newspapers.¹

While Owens’ defiant victory in Hitler’s homecourt remains one of the most memorable events in sport’s history, it is a little-known fact that one of the most famous African-American figures of the twentieth century was also in Berlin during the 1936 Olympics, and his perspective on race relations in Germany was much more nuanced. W.E.B Du Bois, the famed scholar and political activist, returned in June 1936 to the city where he had spent two years during his graduate studies some forty years earlier, for a six-months research trip. Equipped with mastery of the local

¹ Edgar T. Rouzeau, “New York Gives Jesse Owens Hero’s Welcome,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 29, 1936 ; Roi Ottley, “\$40,000 Is Lot of Money To Pass Up, Says Owens,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 29, 1936; Robert L. Vann, “ ‘Inside Story’ Of Olympics Revealed by Courier Editor,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 5, 1936

language, an intimate knowledge of German culture and history, and the advantage of a more extended sojourn, Du Bois was better positioned to explain the racial climate under Nazi rule to African-Americans than the reporters and athletes whose experience was limited only to the Olympics.

This paper will focus on a series of four columns about Nazi Germany, published as part of Du Bois' weekly column in *The Pittsburgh Courier* in December 1936 [I will hereafter refer to these four columns collectively as "The Berlin Series"]. In these columns, Du Bois sought to correct and complicate the "testimony of the casual, non-German-speaking visitor to the Olympic Games," which he considered "worse than valueless in any direction."² Furthermore, unlike these "valueless," superficial *testimonies* by athletes and reporters, Du Bois offered his readers an in-depth *analysis* of Nazi Germany. Even though the main focus of "The Berlin Series" was race relations, his interpretation was more expansive. As a social scientist who devoted his scholarly career to the study of race and race prejudice, Du Bois could not treat race relations as an autonomous social category, detached from the political and economic context. He, therefore, devoted the first two columns to the setting—the circumstances that allowed Hitler to assume power and to establish a totalitarian regime—before reaching a crescendo in the third column, which was solely devoted to race prejudice, and will be the main focus of this paper.³

² W.E.B Du Bois, "Forum of Fact and Opinion," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 5, 1936

³ The fourth column was devoted to potential "threats" to the Nazi regime, that could eventually bring it down. Anti-Semitism is only mentioned in brief in that column as a source for international scrutiny, but not as something that could eventually devastate the regime. Although there are interesting insights in this column, it is beyond the limited scope of this paper which focuses on Du Bois' interpretation of Nazi anti-Semitism.

My research question is: how does Du Bois *translate* Nazi Anti-Semitism to his African-American readers? By ‘translate,’ I mean contextual code-switching, whereby he has to relate to his readers a social phenomenon that is at once very familiar to them, yet is not quite similar. Hence, this act of translation inevitably requires a comparison between the two “case studies” of race prejudice— American Anti-Blackness and Nazi Anti-Semitism. What are the similarities and dissimilarities that Du Bois identifies? And which ones does he prioritize and emphasize?

Anti-Semitism offers a particularly interesting case of comparison to anti-black racism because of the *visible* difference between the two-cases— the absence of a color-line between perpetrators and victims.⁴ I borrow the term ‘color-line,’ from Du Bois’ quintessential work from 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*. In one of Du Bois’ most well-known quotes, he predicted that “[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,— the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” To which side of the color-line do [European] Jews belong? Du Bois had been involved in global anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and the Americas for almost two decades.⁵ All these cases involved Europeans oppressing the “Colored World” (to use the term of the time); the color-line was clear. Anti-Semitism in Europe, however, posed a unique challenge to this dichotomy. How does he explain race prejudice without a color-line? Does the lack of physical difference between victims and perpetrators demand an

⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (190; repr., New-York: Dover Publications, 1994), 9.

⁵ I refer here to the Pan-African Congress, which Du Bois organized in 1919 in Paris, as Du Bois’ entry into international politics, and active involvement in anti-colonial struggles.

adjustment to Du Bois' theoretical understanding of the general phenomenon of race prejudice?

My argument is that Du Bois failed that challenge. His analysis of Nazi Anti-Semitism is replete with contradictions, gaps, and slippages, and does not align with his own theory of race prejudice. I argue that the source of his confusion was his own bias—he was trapped in the paradigm of the color-line; he was so conditioned to view the world in black-and-white, that he couldn't fully grasp the *racialized* aspect of “White-on-White” prejudice. In other words, in the absence of a color-line distinguishing victims and perpetrators, Du Bois was blind to the construction of Jews in Nazi Germany as an essentially separate and inferior race, based on a paradigm of pseudo-scientific, “biological” difference—just like its American counterpart. This blind spot led him to look for an explanation for Anti-Semitism that was different from his analytic understanding of American Anti-Blackness. By doing so-- and since Nazi Anti-Semitism was indeed racially essentialized and coded in the recently imposed Nuremberg Laws-- the racialization of Jews in Germany slips through the cracks for Du Bois' words, without being consciously acknowledged.

The most striking contradiction, which runs like a thread throughout the third column, is between his explicit and implicit conclusions from the comparison between Nazi Anti-Semitism and American Anti-Blackness. While he explicitly emphasizes a qualitative difference based on etiology, he repeatedly makes implicit allusions to the experience of black people in America. He analyzes German Anti-Semitism, implying that the two cases are indeed quite similar.

To understand Du Bois' point of reference and analytical framework, I consider Du Bois' theory of race prejudice, at this specific point in his career, in 1936. As a scholar-activist, theory and praxis for Du Bois were inextricably linked, and continuously evolving. Therefore, I will begin with a political and intellectual biographical overview of Du Bois, leading up to 1936, focusing on the evolution of his theory on race prejudice. I will then turn to the "Berlin Series" and summarize the main arguments of the first two columns, in which Du Bois' analyzes the circumstances that brought Hitler to power, and allowed him to establish a totalitarian regime. Finally, I will conduct a close reading of the third column about Anti-Semitism in Germany.

THE EVOLUTION OF DU BOIS' RACE THEORY

By 1936, W.E.B. Du Bois was 68 years old, a distinguished scholar, and a veteran Civil Rights and Pan-Africanist activist. Two years earlier, in 1934, he was effectively ousted from the organization he helped found in 1909, the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], for advocating a program of economic and educational “self-segregation” in the organization’s official organ, *The Crisis*, which he edited.

Du Bois’ parting ways with the NAACP is often regarded as a point of bifurcation in his career—where the integrationist Civil-Rights leader got under the sway of communism and became virtually irrelevant. According to late historian Manning Marable, this is a false historiographic construction of Du Bois’ intellectual biography. Rather than a sharp break, Manning claims that the Depression only brought to head an increasingly growing ideological divide which predated the NAACP: “the central theoretical elements of what would become Du Boisian social thought— a black radical and democratic analysis of U.S. and global society— were largely in place prior to Du Bois’ joining the NAACP in 1910.”⁶

The process of Du Bois’ radicalization— his growing conviction that race prejudice can neither be analyzed nor solved independently of the economy— was set in motion during his graduate studies in Berlin in 1892-1894. According to his two

⁶ Marable claims that this “revisionist history,” fashioning a schism in Du Bois’ intellectual thought had already begun before his death by fellow social scientists during the McCarthyism era of 1950s Cold War. Du Bois, then in his eighties, was subject in that decade to severe government harassment, repression, and censorship, which eventually led him to flee the United-States and find refuge in Ghana, where he passed in 1963, at the age of ninety-five. Manning Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat*, new ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), viii-ix, xiv.

autobiographies, he “began to unite [his] economics and politics,” as a result of being first exposed to socialist ideas in Berlin.⁷

The two years Du Bois spent in Berlin in his youth were as emotionally and psychologically formative as they were intellectual. “Europe modified profoundly my outlook on life and my thought and feeling toward it.” It was Du Bois’ first time outside the U.S. Like many other African-Americans who arrived in Europe for the first time, he described the experience of interacting with whites outside the strictures of American racial dynamics as a life-changing revelation: “[H]uman companionship, unveiled by the accident of color... [taught me to look] at the world as a man, and not simply from a narrow racial and provincial outlook.” The insight that racial antagonism was not preordained played a significant role in shaping Du Bois’ scholarly pursuits by stirring him to apply “science to the race problem.”⁸

In the following years, as a promising young scholar, Du Bois was increasingly propelled into politics⁹, which, he claimed in his autobiography, “was not wholly to my liking.” He claimed that he had always only wanted to be a scientist and focus on his research, but “one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved.” In 1906 Du Bois was among the founders of

⁷ W.E.B Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, 1940), 47; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (1968; repr., New York: International Pub. Co., 2007), 168

⁸ Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 159; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 45, 50-55

⁹ Du Bois’ entry into the public sphere and into politics, began with a very public feud with the most powerful African-American figure of the time, Booker T. Washington, over the type of education in African-American institutions of higher-education. Washington, Head of the Tuskegee Institute, believed that African-Americans should focus on their financial uplift by acquiring practical training in industrial profession and agriculture. Du Bois, on the other hand, believed that practical training was necessary, but that it was not enough. For the “Talented Tenth,” who would be the future leaders, educators, and thinkers of the race, here must be a viable option to acquire education the liberal arts and sciences. For Du Bois’ full account of the famous controversy see Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 65-88

the “Niagara Movement,” which was the predecessor to the NAACP, which was formed in 1909.¹⁰

Intellectually, Du Bois grew more and more interested in Socialist theory. By 1907, Du Bois had still not yet taken up the study of Marx’s writings, but he read the works of other Socialists¹¹ and grew progressively convinced that race and labor were intimately connected. He proclaimed himself at that year as “Socialist-of-the-Path,” and that “in the socialist trend thus indicated lies the one great hope of the Negro American.”¹² From that point onward, Du Bois was ideologically a Socialist, even though he was not politically affiliated with the American Socialist Party, but for a brief stint between 1911-12.¹³ He grew increasingly convinced that capitalism was the ultimate root of race prejudice, not only in America but on a global scale. He often published editorials in *the Crisis* calling for inter-racial class-based coalitions and was utterly dismayed by the exclusion of African-Americans from organized labor. Race prejudice, he painfully learned, overrode economic interests.¹⁴ This irrational behavior

¹⁰ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 67, 94

¹¹ Marable, *Black Radical Democrat*, 89; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Books," *The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line* 1 (June 1907), in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W.E.B Du Bois: Selections from The Horizon*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (White Plains, NY.: Kraus-Thompson, 1985), 22.

¹² Du Bois refrained from calling himself a full-fledged Socialist at the time, because he did not believe in “complete abolition of private property in capital,” but more moderately in “far greater ownership of the public wealth for the public good.”

W.E.B. Du Bois, "Socialist of the Path," and “Negro and Socialism,” *Horizon* 1 (February 1907), in Du Bois, *Selections from The Horizon*, 6.

¹³ Marable, *Black Radical Democrat*, 90; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 234-6

¹⁴ The number of columns Du Bois wrote about this topic is overwhelming, See, for example, his eulogy of Eugene Debs, who represented the small faction of Socialist leaders who did call for inclusion of African-Americans in labor unions.

“Eugene Debs was one of the few leaders of organized labor in the United States who realized that a large part of the laboring force in this country is of Negro descent. Most labor leaders are either too ignorant or too prejudiced to acknowledge this. Debs knew that no real emancipation of laboring classes in the United States can come as long as black laborers are in partial serfdom. He realized that emancipation called for an effort on the part of both black and white.”

of White workers would later become the focus of his analysis in *Black Reconstruction* (1935).

Perhaps the most significant turning point in Du Bois' intellectual and political life, and a stride in his turn toward Marxism occurred in 1926 when he was invited to visit the Soviet Union. Du Bois was deeply impressed by what he witnessed there. In an editorial written while in Russia, he remarked: "I stand in astonishment and wonder and revelation of Russia that has come to be. I may be partially deceived and half-informed. But if what I have seen with my eyes and heard with my ears in Russia is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik."¹⁵ In his 1940 autobiography, Du Bois professed that "since that trip, my mental outlook and the aspect of the world will never be the same," since he believed that the Bolshevik experiment found the antidote to race prejudice. Indeed, Du Bois would remain an admirer of Russia for the rest of his life, even in the face of reports about Stalin's purges.¹⁶ However, Du Bois never joined the American Communist Party. He rejected what he considered "the dogma of inevitable revolution to right economic wrong," that the Communist Party advanced. Not only did Du Bois object to violence and war in principle, but in the case of America, where experience had already taught him that race prejudice trumped class solidarity he "saw

W.E.B Du Bois, "Eugene Debs," *The Crisis* 33 (December 1926): 65, in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W.E.B Du Bois: Selections from The Crisis*, Vol. 2, 1926-1934, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY.: Kraus-Thompson, 1983), 455

¹⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Russia, 1926" *The Crisis* 33 (November 1926): 8, in Du Bois, *Selections from The Crisis*, 452.

¹⁶ Du Bois did not defend the purges, but maintained that "nothing that Russia has done in war and mass murder exceeds what has been done and is being done by the rest of the civilized world." Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 287-8; Du Bois, *The Autobiography*, 39.

disaster for American Negroes” in following this “creed of eventual violence and revolution” and “ignore[ing] race hate.”¹⁷

The Great Depression set Du Bois on a collision course with the NAACP’s liberal leadership, culminating in his departure in 1934. As the most economically vulnerable sector in American society, African-Americans suffered a fatal blow by the economic crash. Du Bois thought that a responsible leadership had to respond to the need of the hour and change course. There was no point in carrying on lofty struggles for integration and Civil Rights when millions of African-Americans were in desperate need of immediate relief. “The bulk of my colleagues saw no essential change in the world,” he wrote in 1940 about the situation that led to his break with the NAACP, “it was the same world with the problems to be attacked by the same methods as before the war....They recoiled from any consideration of the world’s economic plight or any change in the organization of industry.”¹⁸

Du Bois proposed establishing black consumer cooperatives as an immediate pragmatic solution to the economic exigencies of the Depression, which demanded swift and direct action. Walter White, new Head of the NAACP, most members of the Board, and many liberal supporters of the NAACP considered Du Bois’ cooperatives program as “race chauvinist” and “communist.” They disapproved of Du Bois using the organization’s publication to promote— what they deemed— radical ideas. The final straw was an article titled “Segregation,” published in the January 1934 issue of *The Crisis*, where Du Bois called for “voluntary segregation and cooperation among colored Americans,” in education and economy. Walter White and the NAACP’s

¹⁷ Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 301-2.

¹⁸ Ibid, 290

Board, who categorically objected to any form of segregation, were enraged and demanded that the editor comply with the organization's official policies. Du Bois regarded this demand as an impingement on his editorial prerogatives. After losing a vote on the matter among the NAACP's Board of Directors, he submitted his letter of resignation.¹⁹

After fifteen years with NAACP, Du Bois returned to Atlanta University and immersed himself in research and writing. In 1935, he published *Black Reconstruction*, a Neo-Marxist analysis of Reconstruction. One of Du Bois' main arguments in *Black Reconstruction* is that Emancipation created a revolutionary potential for class-based unity between White and Black laborers against their common exploiters, the Southern land-owning plutocracy. This revolution was aborted by driving a wedge between the laboring masses along racial lines. Planters utilized whiteness for pulling poor Whites into their fold, and against the laborers' economic interest. Consequently, Reconstruction was overthrown and replaced by the Jim Crow system, and the freedman was de-facto re-enslaved.

The race element was emphasized in order that property-holders could get the support of the majority of white laborers and make it more possible to exploit Negro labor. But the race philosophy came as a new and terrible thing to make labor unity or labor class-consciousness impossible. So long as the Southern white laborers could be induced to prefer poverty to equality with the Negro, just so long was a labor movement in the South made impossible....²⁰

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Segregation," *The Crisis* 41 (January 1934):20, in *Selections from The Crisis*, 727; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: H. Holt, 2000), 336-46; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 293-313

²⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935), 680

DU BOIS IN NAZI GERMANY

In October 1934, shortly after leaving the NAACP, Du Bois wrote to Wilbor K. Thomas, Executive Director of the Oberlaender Trust for German-American Cultural Relations. The Trust awarded an annual research fellowship in Germany, and Du Bois was seeking Mr. Thomas' advice regarding the prospects of a research proposal for an admittedly controversial "sociological investigation." Mentioning the two years he had spent in Berlin between 1892-4, Du Bois proposed "a forty-year estimate of changes in essential German culture, from one not only outside the nation but outside the Nordic race." In the context of Hitler's recent rise to power in Germany, the emphasis on Du Bois' unique perspective as a black man makes clear that the subtext of his inquiry refers to race relations, namely Anti-Semitism under Nazi rule. Unsurprisingly, Thomas dissuaded Du Bois from pursuing this proposal.²¹

The following year, Du Bois tactfully proposed a much less contentious topic—the relation of education to the industry in Germany—and was awarded the fellowship.²² Although Du Bois was sincerely interested in education and industry for his cooperative plan, the real object of his fascination remained what he had delineated to Thomas. "The scientific study of races and race relations in Europe...is the primary reason why I am here."²³ He cryptically disclosed in one of the weekly columns he penned for *The Pittsburgh Courier* while he was in Germany: Throughout his stay in Germany Du Bois refrained from discussing race-relations in Germany in his columns.

²¹ W.E.B Du Bois to The Oberlaender Trust, 17 October 1934, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst. [Hereafter cited as Du Bois Papers]. Du Bois eventually applied with a different proposal, but did not receive the fellowship that year.

²² The Oberlaender Trust to W.E.B Du Bois, 12 June 1935, Du Bois Papers

²³ W.E.B Du Bois, "Forum of Fact and Opinion," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 26, 1936.

Being fully aware of Nazi surveillance, Du Bois had to strategically self-censor his columns, as he explained to *The Courier*'s editor before his departure: "I shall write frankly, except during the time that I am in Germany, and I shall say nothing about the race question until I get out of the country."²⁴

Du Bois' silence on race relations in Germany was finally broken on December 5th, 1936, while he was on board a train to China.

The Berlin Series

Du Bois opened that column with an apology to his readers for not having written but "a word here and there about minor aspects of the German scene" throughout his stay there in the previous months. "I am sure my friends have understood my hesitations and reticence: it simply wasn't safe to attempt anything further."²⁵ He then moves to present the two sides on Nazi Germany: On one hand, "Germany has food and housing, and is, on the whole, contented and prosperous." Unemployment has been significantly reduced, infrastructure is being built everywhere, and "public order is perfect," he wrote. This perfect order, however, comes with a price tag: "Germany is silent, nervous, suppressed; it speaks in whispers; there's no public opinion, no opposition, no discussion of anything."²⁶

The most troubling aspect of the Nazi paradox, however, is race relation. Here, however, is a paradox-within-a paradox; despite an unapologetic "campaign of race prejudice [that is] carried on, openly, continuously and determinedly against all non-Nordic races," it went unnoticed by the visitors to the Olympics, even the African-

²⁴ W.E.B Du Bois to Robert L. Vann, 4 May 1936, Du Bois Papers. After Germany, Du Bois continued his trip further East to China and Japan, from which he kept publishing weekly columns.

²⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Forum of Fact and Opinion," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec 5, 1936.

²⁶ Ibid

American ones. Du Bois himself asserts “treated with uniform courtesy and consideration. It would have been impossible for me to have spent a similarly long time in any part of the United States, without some, if not frequent cases of personal insult or discrimination. I cannot record a single instance here.” What misguided African-Americans, Du Bois implies, was that the *modus operandi* of race prejudice in Germany operated differently from that in the U.S. Namely, the main targets of the prejudice are not dark-skinned people, but Jews. Moreover, Du Bois asserts, that the “campaign” against Jews “suppresses in vindictive cruelty and public insult anything I’ve ever seen; and I have seen much.”²⁷

The intensity of the dissonance between the prosperity and public order that one sees, and the tension that one feels; between the refreshing courtesy afforded to Black people, and the *vindictive cruelty* against Jews, is so disorienting “that one cannot express it without seeming to convince oneself of deliberate misstatement.” Herein lies “the paradox and contradiction” that Du Bois sets out to unpack in the following columns.²⁸

In line with Du Bois’ Marxist belief that race prejudice is a product of economic relations, he begins his in-depth examination of Nazi Germany with a historical analysis of the circumstances that brought Hitler to power. In brief, the combination of post-war devastation, humiliation, and debt imposed by “the capitalists of England, France, and America” in The Versailles Peace Treaty, which was “no less than devilish in its concealed ingenuity,” followed by the global economic

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

Depression— brought Germany to the brink of a Marxist revolution.²⁹ From this “impenetrable mist” of destitution, humiliation, and despair, Hitler emerged like a messiah who “offered a way out” when Germans saw none. Hitler’s platform was based on a welfare policy so encompassing that it bore an uncanny resemblance to communism, without eliminating private profit altogether. Faced with the complete abolition of private profit as the alternative, those in control of the means of production were willing to throw in their lot with anyone who stood a chance of prevailing over the workers, and thus “they all submitted to a man who had at first been a joke, then a pest, and who suddenly loomed as a dictator.” In other words, German capitalists preferred to lose some than all; “they yielded to socialism—they had to...to save capital and private profit, by yielding enough to the German worker to keep him quiet and satisfied.”³⁰

Hitler rose to power based on a deal, or compromise with capitalists, but he was able to consolidate power and “set up a tyranny”—a terror police-state with an intricate web of domestic espionage and monitoring of civilians to thwart even the slightest sign of opposition—owing to a “deal” with the workers, Du Bois further observed. German workers “know the cost which they pay and they hate it. They hate war, they hate spying, they hate the loss of their liberties.” In return for this “immense sacrifice,” German workers receive a host material and immaterial rewards:

[T]hey have domestic peace after a generation of wars and rumors of wars; they have a nation at work, after a nightmare of unemployment;... houses for the poor; new roads; an end of strikes and labor troubles; widespread industrial and unemployment

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid; W.E.B. Du Bois, “Forum of Fact and Opinion,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 12, 1936.

insurance; the guarding of public and private health; great *celebrations*, organizations for old and young, new *songs*, new *ideals*, a new state, a new *race*.³¹ [My italics]

Work, shelter, health, infrastructure— for Du Bois, these are the obvious, basic requirements for a stable government. More interesting, are the immaterial rewards. They operate on multiple planes: social (organizations, public order), cultural (celebrations, songs), ideological, and most importantly—psychological— codified by “new race.”

The idea that racial superiority functions as a *psychological wage* that can override economic interests, is at the core of Du Bois’ analysis of the overthrow of a burgeoning inter-racial workers coalition American South in *Black Reconstruction*. It is one of the most important theoretical contributions Du Bois introduces to classical Marxism in this quintessential work from 1935.

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools...³²

In order of this “psychological wage” to have value, “incessant propaganda” must be used to build up “a determined psychology of caste.” Du Bois emphasizes the central role of propaganda, “this systematic distortion of the truth for the purpose of making large numbers of people believe anything Authority wishes them to believe,” both in the American South and Nazi Germany. In the South, “[i]n every possible way

³¹ Ibid

³² Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 700

it was impressed and advertised that the white was superior and the Negro an inferior race.”³³ In Germany,

[propaganda] has grown into an art, if not a science. Nowhere is it being used to such tremendous advantage as in Germany today. Newspapers, public speakers, the radio, expositions, celebrations, books and periodicals, every possible vehicle of information and training, including schools, is being used today on German people to teach them that they are the most remarkable people on earth...and that Jews are responsible for all criticism heaped on Germany and for the most of the other ills of modern countries.”³⁴

If propaganda against Jews is so omnipresent, then how come visitors to the Olympics didn't notice it? In the third column, Du Bois returns to this paradox. “Visitors to the Olympics games...saw no Jewish oppression. Just as Northern visitors to Mississippi see no Negro oppression.” Prejudice has a tendency of making itself visible only to its victims, even when it is as blatant. This blindness is further compounded by the exhalatory sense of freedom and dignity which many African-Americans recount about their experience in Europe.³⁵

Selfish obliviousness to discrimination against others is, however, only part of the explanation. The underlying cause, according to Du Bois, is an inability to *perceive* something that is unfamiliar. African-Americans are primed to perceive color-prejudice, but “in the case of Jews, one meets something different, which an American Negro does not readily understand.” As per Du Bois, Nazi race prejudice escapes African-Americans because is *qualitatively* different from the American one:

³³ Ibid, 695; Du Bois, “Forum,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 12, 1936

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Forum of Fact and Opinion,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 19, 1936.

There is race prejudice in Germany, and a regular, planned propaganda to increase it and make it characteristic of the Third Reich. But is not *instinctive* prejudice, except in the case of the Jews, and not altogether there. I mean that German prejudice is *not* the result of long belief, backed by child teaching, and outward insignia like color or hair. It is *reasoned* prejudice, or an economic fear. Consequently, in the case of Negroes, it does not show itself readily.³⁶ [My italics].

Du Bois claims that German Anti-Semitism may share some external manifestations with American Anti-Blackness, but is in effect, fundamentally different; it emanates from unsimilar historical origins, and operates on a different level of consciousness. Borrowing an analogy from the medical world to explicate Du Bois' claim about the relationship between Anti-Jewish and Anti-Black prejudices, I'd liken the two prejudices to two separate diseases ("antigens") manifesting some similar symptoms, rather than one disease in manifesting different symptoms in two patients. Taking this analogy a step further, Du Bois delineates a differential diagnosis of race prejudice with the analytical tools of a sociologist, thereby identifying and defining different types of race prejudice. At bottom, he felt that there was a fundamental difference between American and Nazi Anti-Semitism, that had to be conveyed to his readers.

Du Bois' typology of "reasoned" and "instinctive" and prejudice are not only "astonishingly loose" for a sociologist as some have argued in the past,³⁷ but should be outright peculiar to any connoisseur of Du Bois' work. The former is inherently

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Historian David Levering Lewis comments in his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Du Bois, that these categories exhibit "astonishing looseness for a sociologist." Lewis is the only historian thus far to give more than a fleeting mention to Du Bois' columns from Berlin, if any. However, he doesn't propose a serious analysis of it, but rather tries to summarize Du Bois' message as "In Germany, the Jew is the Negro," which I think completely subverts Du Bois' argument. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 399.

illogical, and the latter implies an essentializing conception of race and race antagonism that diametrically contradicts Du Bois' beliefs and career-long crusade to use science and education to eradicate race prejudice. The term "reasoned prejudice" is, by definition, an oxymoron; prejudice can never be governed by reason.³⁸ The term 'instinct,' suggests an innate, unconscious reaction.³⁹ Thus "instinctive prejudice" would mean that people are born prejudiced. This is a misconception that Du Bois had been trying to disabuse the public of, for over two decades. For example, in a *Crisis* editorial from 1914, Du Bois penned a rebuttal against the claim that "[race antagonism] is an instinctive repulsion." "Race antipathy is not instinctive but a matter of careful education. Black and white children play together gladly and know no prejudice until it is implanted precept upon precept and by strong social pressure."⁴⁰ In addition, as we've seen, one of his main arguments in *Black Reconstruction* was that race prejudice was a product of economic relations, rather than any "instinctive" anti-black propensity among whites.

What is the explanation, then, for Du Bois' choice of these category-names? I can only assume that since he was writing for the general public, he chose affect over accuracy. He wanted to convey the visceral, [illusionary] feeling, for race hatred that

³⁸ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'prejudice' as: "Preconceived opinion *not based on reason* or actual experience; bias, partiality; (now) spec. *unreasoned* dislike, hostility, or antagonism towards, or discrimination against, a race, sex, or other class of people." [My italics]. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "prejudice, (n.)". accessed July 6, 2019, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/150162?rskey=w1MAdL&result=1> (accessed December 22, 2019).

³⁹ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'instinct' as: "an *innate* propensity in organized beings...and manifesting itself in acts which appear to be rational, but are *performed without conscious design* or intentional adaptation of means to ends *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "instinct (n.)". <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/Entry/97085> (accessed December 22, 2019).

⁴⁰ W.E.B Du Bois, "Does Race Antagonism Serve Any Good Purpose," *The Crisis* 8 (September 1914): 232-233, in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W.E.B Du Bois: Selections from The Crisis*, Vol. 1, 1911-1925, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY.: Kraus-Thompson Org. Ltd., 1983), 81.

is so ingrained from infancy, that it *feels* like it is instinctual. Quote from an unpublished manuscript written the following year gives a good explanation of what he meant by “instinctive racism.”:

Race hate and antagonism had to be raised to the status of instinct and religion so as to array not only the barriers of logic against the majority of the peoples of the world but the most dangerous barriers of unconscious, non - logical reaction.⁴¹

This explanation of poor word-choice for the sake of affect over accuracy is consistent with Du Bois’ definition of “instinctive” prejudice as it appears in this text and only. His definition is in the form of negation: “German prejudice [against Jews] is not the result of long belief, backed by child teaching, and outward insignia like color or hair.” He does not claim that “instinctive prejudice” is innate, but a result of socialization over many generations. Here, however, we encounter another confusing inconsistency. Here he claims that Nazi Anti-Semitism is *not* “the result of long belief, backed by child teaching,” but soon thereafter he writes that “for many centuries Germans have disliked Jews,” and goes on to elaborate on the history of Anti-Semitism in Germany. Later in the text, he writes that Hitler “was born to dislike of Jews.” Since no one is *born* disliking any group of people or the other, the implication is that he was reared in the bosom of Anti-Semitism. How do we settle this contradiction? Perhaps this is the key to understanding his assertion that “prejudice against Jews in Germany comes *nearer* being instinctive than color prejudice.” but is “not altogether there.” Hence, the first criterion for “instinctive prejudice” of longevity across generations is met, while clearly, the second one—visible physical difference—

⁴¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *A World Search For Democracy* (unpublished manuscript, 1937), Du Bois Papers, 25

is not. In sum, the *sine qua non* for “instinctive prejudice” is a color-line. In its absence, Anti-Semitism can only “get near.”⁴²

If Du Bois’ working definition of “instinctive prejudice” is somewhat convoluted, the definition of “reasoned prejudice” is straight-forward: “economic fear.” However, Du Bois adds, this has not always been the case: “the reasons [for German dislike of Jews] have varied, *and are not at all analogous to white dislike of blacks in America*. Economic reasons, built on a foundation of religion and clan solidarity, are the real explanation.” [my italics]. As Du Bois goes on to explain, the economic circumstances that caused this “fear,” are themselves a historical product of involuntary and voluntary exclusion.

Du Bois’ crash course on Jewish history in Germany deserves careful examination. His word-choice, anecdotal ornaments, and what he focuses on, belie his explicit assertion about the incongruity of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Blackness. His account on the history of German Jewry is further replete with tacit appeals to experiences familiar to African-Americans. Arguably, he did so to arouse African-Americans’ sympathy for Jews, dispel Anti-Semitic notions, and draw lessons from the Jewish experience that are relevant to the American context. A close reading also illuminates that while Du Bois was aware of the changing manifestations of Anti-Semitism throughout the ages, he failed to recognize the defining feature of its latest form—racialization.

In the middle ages strangers who did not believe in Christ were largely excluded from land-holding and work as artisans or shop-keepers, and found a way to make a living

⁴² Du Bois, “Forum,” December 19, 1936

in the new commerce and money-lending. I have seen the old Juden-gasse in Frankfurt, where the Rothchilds, Schiffs, and other great capitalists were *caged up* of nights in *narrow quarters*, lest they contaminate Christians; and where they laid the foundations of wealth and power, *despite insult and oppression*. [my italics]⁴³

Du Bois begins by tackling Anti-Semitism by providing a historical explanation for Jews' over-representation in the commerce and finance sectors. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the most wide-spread Anti-Semitic trope in Europe, was that of the unscrupulous, greedy Jew. Focusing on a handful of Jewish magnates, myths of Jewish world-domination conspiracies through control of the press and global economy, flourished throughout Europe.⁴⁴ Du Bois explains that Jews' material prosperity was born out of historic religious discrimination. The first sentence alone would suffice as an intro to the history of German Anti-Semitism. It is rather the second sentence that reveals Du Bois' aims, since it is entirely redundant content-wise. The Rothschilds and the Schiffs built their empires because of religious economic restrictions. Residential restrictions have nothing to do with their successful enterprises. The function of this sentence is thus to create an emotional effect; an appeal to African-Americans' sympathy through familiar experiences of occupational discrimination and residential segregation. The poignant depiction of Jews as "caged

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Although myths about Jewish world conspiracy date back at least to the Middle Ages, they became the dominant form of Anti-Semitism only in the Modern Age. According to Walter Laqueur, "it was only towards the middle of the [nineteenth] century that political conspiracy theories became truly fashionable." The most popular and notorious of these modern Jewish world conspiracy theories, was *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated record of sessions delineating the Jews' plan of world domination. First published in Russia in 1903, it was widely distributed there before the WWI, but it was only after the Russian Revolution of 1917 that it gained an international reach, and translated to many languages, by pro-czarist expatriates who claimed that the revolution was part of the Jewish plan. Walter Laqueur, *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 96-9

up” in “narrow” living quarters, invokes the densely populated dwellings African-Americans were confined to in North-American cities. To drive the point home, Du Bois reasserts that Jews managed to overcome the obstacles “despite insult and oppression.”

The reason that Du Bois begins by recounting the discriminatory origins of Jews’ prominence in the economic sector, and that he “labors” to create identification with the Jews, has as much to do with Harlem as it does with Germany. Du Bois is trying to overcome barriers of hostility against Jews, amongst his readers, which reached an all-time high during the Depression. Like smallpox and Measles, Anti-Semitism survived the trip across the Atlantic. Anti-Semitism was rampant in the United-States in the early twentieth century, and African-Americans were not immune to it. Being part of an oppressed minority has never precluded its members from adopting stereotypical hegemonic attitudes against another minority. Hence, in part, African-Americans imbibed Anti-Semitic views from White America. But there were also local reasons for tensions between the two communities that reinforced the image of the exploitative, money-loving Jew.

Hostilities strained the relationship between the two communities since the early twentieth century. In cities like New York and Chicago, poverty and racial discrimination in housing, drove African-Americans arriving from the South Urban North during the Great Migration, to neighborhoods inhabited by Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who had arrived a few decades earlier. Harlem, for example, was mostly a Jewish neighborhood before it became the “Black Mecca” in the 1920s. Jews who could afford to, moved away when the mass of African-Americans flocked into

Harlem, but the poorer ones stayed. More importantly— many businesses in the neighborhood remained Jewish-owned. Thus, most of the interactions African-American had with Jews were economic in nature, and conducive to a one-dimensional view of Jews as capitalist exploiters. The fact that Jews were often employed as rent collectors (unknownst to the tenants who thought Jews were the owners who overcharged them) wasn't exactly a mitigating factor.⁴⁵ These racial tensions between African-Americans and Jews in Harlem simmered in the 1930s, around the issue of employment discrimination in Jewish-owned stores. The “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign which launched in 1934 spurred a wave of Anti-Semitism, which culminated in the 1935 Harlem Riot, where many Jewish-owned stores were vandalized and looted.⁴⁶

The second historic “foundation” to German Anti-Semitism, according to Du Bois, is “clan solidarity.” Unlike the involuntary exclusion Jews faced during the Middle Ages due to their heretic faith, “clan solidarity” refers to Jews’ voluntary separateness, or unwillingness to shed their group distinction by fully assimilating into the modern secular German state through inter-marriage:

As time went on, Jews became free and honored citizens of Germany, contributing to science and art, to finance and banking; still, while intermarrying now and then, excluded from the socially elect—the nobility, the high places in the army, the chief

⁴⁵ Hasia R. Diner, “Between Words and Deeds: Jews and Blacks in America 1880-1935,” in *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 96-101

⁴⁶ In her book about Harlem grassroot organizing during the Depression, historian Cheryl Greenberg notes that some of the groups leading the jobs campaign increasingly turned it into an “anti-white campaign, often targeting particular ethnic groups,” and that “their strongest invective...was reserved for Jews” since most store-owners in Harlem were Jewish. Sufi Abdul Hamid, the most vocal among the black-nationalist leaders of the campaign, was so Anti-Semitic that he became known as “Black Hitler,” and was accused of spreading Nazi propaganda. see Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 126-7.

office of the state. But *curiously enough*, the chief indictment against Jews at this time, *was not that they did, but that they would not intermarry with Germans and lose their identity in the German state*. They thus became objects of envy, fear and hatred among workers and less educated folk of the middle class. Waves of new anti-semitism, accompanied by malicious slanders, arose again and again in the 18th and nineteenth century.⁴⁷ [My italics]

As the Church lost its political power to the modern nation-state as the central organizing unit of society, religion became a matter of the private sphere— the home and the family. In the public sphere, the new concept of *citizenship*, ostensibly “liberated” Jews from the religious persecution they endured for centuries, by giving them equal civic rights. Jews were now allowed to be a part of German society, albeit only partially and conditionally. The occupational and residential restrictions of the Middle Ages were lifted, but Jews were still shunned from the strongholds of political power. As Jewish identity became centered around the family, the price tag for full integration into the German *body politic*, was *absorption*. Jews were effectively coerced to lose their group cohesion and Jewish cultural heritage by intermarrying. Just as Middle Ages Jews withstood the duress to convert to Christianity, modern-age German Jews *chose* to maintain their distinctiveness in the privacy of their home. When Jews refused the terms of the plea bargain, they were perceived as rejecting German society, and suffered harsh repercussions.

While Du Bois’ implicit juxtaposition of the restrictions imposed on Jews in the Middle Ages with those African-Americans face evoked a sense of familiarity, in this section, the emphasis is on difference. Inter-racial marriage in the United-States was the ultimate taboo. Here, however, was another so-called “despised” race, that

⁴⁷ Du Bois, “Forum,” December 19, 1936

was not only allowed— but practically coerced— to intermarry. Perhaps even more surprising to Du Bois’ African-American readership was that Jews *chose* to not assimilate, “lose their identity in the German state,” even in face of harsh retribution. The element of surprise, or defied expectations, can be grasped through Du Bois’ usage of the phrase “curiously enough,” and then of double-negation: “not that they did, but that they would not intermarry with Germans.” The ban on inter-marriage was so ingrained in the African-American experience, that it had become naturalized; it was hardly imaginable that any “race” would face a similar plight for a pretext diametrically opposed to their reality. Moreover, if the demand for Jews was to intermarry, it challenges “race theory” about the “natural” and “eternal” separation of races, and exposes the falsehood of White Supremacist against intermarriage and miscegenation as Law of Nature. In similar vein, Du Bois had referred to Anti-Semitism a number of times to disprove arguments that race prejudice emanates from inferiority. As early as 1914, he wrote in a *Crisis* editorial that “the prejudice against the Jews, age long and world wide is surely not based on inferior ability. We have only to name Jeremiah. D’Israeli and Jesus Christ to set our minds at rest on that point.”⁴⁸ In a postscript titled “The Jews,” published in *The Crisis* shortly after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 he wrote:

It seems impossible that in the middle of the 20th Century a country like Germany could turn to race hate as a political expedient... The absurdity of it in the case of Germany is too patent to recall. One has only to think of a hundred names like Mendelssohn, Heine, and Einstein, to remember but partially what the Jew has done

⁴⁸ Du Bois, “Race Antagonism,” 232-233, in *Selections from The Crisis*, 81

for German civilization. It all reminds the American Negro that after all race prejudice has nothing to do with accomplishment or desert, with genius or ability.⁴⁹

The fact that Jews allegedly had a choice between persecution and “los[ing] their identity,” could be interpreted as “victim blaming,” because Jews had an opportunity to end their ostracization and become Germans, and chose not to. I believe, however, that Du Bois’ intent was not to scrutinize Jews, but rather to issue a warning for “assimilationist” African-Americans. First, he describes intermarriage as “loss of identity”—an unequivocally negative outcome. Second, and—more importantly—the historical context of Du Bois’ recent parting with the NAACP over his cooperative initiative disabused him of dreams of integration, and put him on a collision course with White and Black Liberals. Taking this context into considering suggests that Du Bois brings forth this historical precedent as a cautionary tale to his fellow African-American against the false promise of eventual acceptance. His message is that full civic equality for historically excluded groups is contingent on an implicit demand for them to be *absorbed* rather than *integrated* in dominant society, at the cost of losing their group distinction and cultural heritage. Self-preservation is thus perceived by hegemonic society as rejection of its “generous” offer for inclusion extended, and met with approbation and labeling as “separatist,” or “nationalist.” Thus, by claiming that resistance to “clan solidarity” should be expected, but that it is vital for the group’s survival, Du Bois actually lauds Jews rather than denounces them. Hence, even when Du Bois seemingly emphasizes a divergence between Jews and African-American histories of persecution, underneath the surface are lessons for

⁴⁹ W.E.B Du Bois, “The Jews,” *The Crisis* 40 (May 1933): 117, in Du Bois, *Selections from The Crisis*, 701.

African-Americans that are only applicable because of the fundamental similarity of their plights.

The following paragraph is the apex of the “Berlin Series.” Everything written until this point converges to explain what Du Bois termed “reasoned prejudice,” fueled by “economic fear.”

In the World War Jews did their legal service, but they were not eager to serve in an army in which they could not act as officers. After the war, bankers, financiers and merchants had many opportunities to profiteer at the expense of the workers and middle class. Jews were prominent in such happenings because they were so largely represented in these callings. Their success in professions and in the competitive civil service brought all the envy and jealousy of the wretched to bear upon them, and Adolf Hitler, born to dislike of Jews, was the appropriate instrument for the undoing of the Jews in Germany.⁵⁰

Just as he had done in the previous two columns about the political-economic climate that gave rise to Hitlerism, Du Bois turns to World War I and its aftermath as the epilogue to the Nazi era, and from which tone can grasp how it developed. Thus, his starting point to understand the novel Nazi version of Anti-Semitism, is German Jews’ participation in the war effort. According to his account, Jews served their country, despite the insult of being treated as second-class citizens, and barred from commanding positions. I find it odd that Du Bois chose to include this information here to begin with— either the fact of Jews’ participation in the German army during WWI, or their exclusion from officary ranks and Jews’ subsequent dissatisfaction. This sentence seems out-of-place, as it does not contribute to the overall explanation about Nazi Anti-Semitism, which Du Bois regards as motivated by economic reasons.

⁵⁰ Du Bois, “Forum,” December 19, 1936

Two explanations come to mind for Du Bois' decision to include this information here. First, is pointing to another parallel with the African-American experience in the U.S. military during the war. The story that he recounts about German Jews rings familiar to African-Americans, who too eagerly answered Uncle Sam's call and volunteered en-masse to fight for a country that treated them as second-class citizens, as well as soldiers. They too, felt that their loyalty and sacrifice were answered with slap in the face: they served in segregated units, and were often subject to violence, and even lynching, by their white compatriots. They too were confined to rank-and-file, until the NAACP, with personal involvement of Du Bois, successfully managed to pressure the government to train black officers for their segregated units. Although this was a major success for the NAACP and for Du Bois personally, the war left black veterans with a bitter aftertaste. Du Bois, who actively encouraged African-Americans to "close ranks" and join the military when The U.S. entered the war, was infuriated by the accounts on the mistreatment of African-American soldiers, and the stark ingratitude they received in return. It was, therefore, a personal sore spot for Du Bois, which explains why he chose to mention this detail about German Jews. And so the anecdote shows yet again a sympathy and identification with the Jews.

A second explanation concerns the "stab-in-the-back" myth that was prominent in Nazi propaganda. Du Bois refers to this myth, in the second column when he describes the tenants of Nazi ideology:

The philosophy of Hitlerism is not logical nor complete. Nor on the other hand is it wholly illogical and hypocritical...Based on the old German idea of the state, it declares that the state and not the working class is the real unit to be developed. All

opposition in the state must disappear... Moreover, this new state which Germany is building is something wholly and superior. It is composed of pure Nordics, with no contamination of Jews nor of inferior races. Its in-born superiority is proven by history and experience. Germany was not beaten in the World War—she fought 14 nations to a standstill, and only succumbed when her own people betrayed her. This must never happen again...⁵¹

Although Du Bois does not explicitly refer to Jews as the traitors in this description, the previous sentence (which I will return to shortly), does single out Jews and thereby “puts them in the orbit” of this accusation. In the context of the paragraph about the reasons for Nazi Anti-Semitism, it makes sense to discuss this myth. But it seems that Bois is acting as the Jews’ defense attorney without explicitly presenting the indictment to his readers. It remains unclear to me, why he is not addressing it directly.

Within the apex of the “Berlin Series.” Everything written until this point converges to explain the basis, cause, and nature of “reasoned prejudice” against Jews in Nazi Germany. Fundamentally, Du Bois’ argument is that because Germans confined Jews to finance and commerce centuries ago, they were over-represented in the small strata of businessmen who benefitted from Germany’s post-War economic devastation. In turn, this exploitative coterie drew the ire and jealousy of the starving laborers and middle-class. Hitler recognized the opportunity to divert all the pent-up frustration toward Jews, and portrayed them as the architects of Germany’s plunder after the war. Jews were the perfect scapegoat, both because of their position in the economy, and because of the long-seated German animosity for Jews over centuries.

⁵¹ Du Bois, “Forum,” December 12, 1936

The central paragraph is also where Du Bois flounders, and exposes his fundamental misunderstanding of Nazi Anti-Semitism. Du Bois confounds *the reason* for current Jew-hatred, with the pretext. i.e., the Germans' own reasoning. That would be tantamount to asserting that the reason Southerners hate African-Americans is because they are overrepresented amongst thieves and rapists.

Despite Du Bois' critical acumen, and life-long exposure to the falsities of White-Supremacist propaganda, he fell prey to some aspects of Nazi propaganda. Unaware that he was accepting some myths as truths, his explanation for the cause of this new version of economic Anti-Semitism, is almost identical to the one spread by Nazi propaganda, save two differences. First, he doesn't blame all Jews, or only Jews for exploiting the German people at their darkest hour. While he does not exonerate Jews from that accusation, he instead mitigates Jews' responsibility by saying that it was a result of the that Jews were over-represented in those exploitative professions because of their historical exclusion from other professions. Second, according to Nazi propaganda, Jews plundered the German people because cunning, greediness, and deceit are their *racial* traits; they are born this way. Du Bois' blind spot is that he fails to understand that these traits are believed as biological and therefore inherent to all Jews. In other words, because traits are encoded in the race, they are immutable.

By failing to see the racialized construction of Jews in Nazi propaganda, Du Bois seems to take for granted racialization and racialized language throughout. For example, when describing the Germans' view of Jews as a biological race, he overlooks racialization. Rather he insists that the reason for Anti-Semitism is purely economic, and "reasoned," rather than "instinctual," which is reserved for skin color.

What Du Bois does see is that the biological racialization of Jews was a new phenomenon (which did not begin with the Nazi era, but codified, theorized and taken to extreme by them). Hence there is a contradiction between the type of race prejudice that Du Bois attributes to Nazi Anti-Semitism as reasoned, and his own unacknowledged use of racialized language.

Du Bois employs the words “contamination” to speak about Jews, and “pure,” and “in-born superiority,” to describe what German think of themselves. ‘Pure,’ and ‘contamination’ are also words that are borrowed from the biological lexicon. In this context, “pure,” refers to the “purity of German blood,” or anti-miscegenation in American parlance. Similarly, if German are *born* superior, then Jews are *born* inferior. Moreover, towards the end of the column, Du Bois enumerates a slew of accusations, restrictions, and loss of rights that were imposed on German Jews under Nazi rule. Among these he mentions that “at Nuremberg recently [Hitler] accused the ‘foreign Jewish element’ as causing the rotting of the Aryan world.”⁵² This quote was taken from Hitler’s speech at the Nuremberg rally of the Nazi Party in September 1935, where the infamous “Nuremberg Laws” were enacted. The law “For Protection of German Blood” prohibited the marriage and sexual intercourse between A German and a Jew. If it bears resemblance to American anti-miscegenation laws, it is not coincidental.

As the historian James Q. Whitman has shown that the Nazis studied American Jim Crow laws and modeled their blood purity laws after them.⁵³ Du Bois mentions

⁵² Du Bois, “Forum,” December 19, 1936

⁵³ James Q. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017).

the Nuremberg Laws, but only that “Jews[are] jailed for sex relations with German women.”⁵⁴ but does not refer to the marriage ban, or, more importantly— to the notion of “purity of blood.”

Du Bois used racialized language, but never consciously acknowledges the biological—racialized aspect of Nazi Anti-Semitism that is incongruent with his typology that it is “reasoned” prejudice. I argue that Du Bois’ fixation on “economic envy” is at the root of Nazi Anti-Semitism, stems from his Marxist outlook. His belief that race prejudice is rooted in economic relations, made the Nazi “explanation” seem very plausible. Unlike the African-American case where economic interests guise themselves in race, in this case, there’s no need to unveil something hidden— the economic element is right on the surface. And that was exactly what Du Bois meant by the difference between “reasoned,” and “instinctual” prejudice. One is economic in plain sight, the other uses a color line to hide.

⁵⁴ Ibid

CONCLUSION

In 1952, Du Bois delivered an address at a “Tribute to the Warsaw ghetto fighters,” organized by the Jewish-American magazine *Jewish Life*. In his address, Du Bois spoke about his first encounter, as a young African-American student in Berlin, with race prejudice among Europeans. “I was astonished; because race problems at the time were to me problems of color, and particularly of slavery in the United States and near-slavery in Africa.”⁵⁵ It was a shocking revelation to him, that race prejudice could exist without a color-line.

Although by the time he returned to Berlin in 1936 he wasn’t as naïve as he had been some forty years earlier, and was well aware that race prejudice exists in many forms and practically everywhere, he seemed to have not fully internalized, that not only could race prejudice exist without a color-line, but that it could also be as deeply seated, and as racialized. In these texts, we can see that he couldn’t grasp that Anti-Semitism and Anti-Blackness could be essentially similar. He theorized, that only a color difference could evoke an instinctual reaction, and that “white-on-white” prejudice

In the same address, Du Bois recounts another insight that he had recently had in Europe. On the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, Du Bois reached “a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem. In the first place, the problem of slavery, emancipation and caste in the United States was no longer in my mind a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it. It was not even solely a matter of color and physical and racial characteristics, which was particularly a hard thing for

⁵⁵ W. E. B Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto” *Jewish Life* 6, No.7 (April 1952):14-15.

me to learn, since for a lifetime the color line had been a real and efficient cause of misery.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Ibid

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