

W. E. B. Du Bois and Otto von Bismarck: Lessons from Germany

[MICHAEL JANEČEK]

The early years of W. E. B. Du Bois, arguably the most influential African-American intellectual of the twentieth century, remain largely understudied.¹ Within this glaring gap of scholarship, I became intrigued by Du Bois' upbringing and education in connection to his grand tour of Europe. Here, I attempt to explain how Du Bois' focus on German issues and his study in Berlin in the 1890s shaped his education.

In Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Du Bois obtained a superior northern education and fostered dreams of going to Harvard.² He grew up surrounded by white Protestantism, muted racism (compared to post-Reconstruction South), and less than thirty black families—factors that together shaped Du Bois' racial self-identification and ambitions.³ Young Du Bois attended the local high school as well as a college prep course in Greek and Latin at the newly built episcopal Sunday school.⁴ Beginning a long series of academic accomplishments, Du Bois “provoked repeated applause” when giving his high school graduation speech on Wendell Phillips, the abolitionist and Harvard alumnus.⁵

When Du Bois' was seventeen, his disabled mother died. The loss released him to pursue college to, in his own words, “repa[y] her sacrifice with extraordinary success.”⁶ Though feeling worthy of Harvard, for financial reasons Du Bois enrolled at Fisk University, a

1 Kenneth Barkin, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Kaiserreich,” *Central European History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 155.

2 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (University of Massachusetts: 1973), 5.

3 David Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 24.

4 *Ibid.*, 40.

5 *Ibid.*, 41.

6 *Ibid.*, 43.

predominantly black university in Nashville.⁷ Four Protestant churches of Great Barrington came together to pay Du Bois' education at Fisk, demonstrating how the community continued to support his success.⁸

At Fisk, likely influenced by prior exposure to Latin literature, Du Bois became fascinated by Germany. He took more than 190 hours' worth of German classes and followed contemporary German issues.⁹ Du Bois even wrote a poem in German, read Schiller, and made Otto von Bismarck the focus of his valedictorian commencement speech.¹⁰ In 1888, Du Bois fulfilled his dream and enrolled at Harvard, but the institution demoted his four-year Fisk degree to a three-year degree, forcing Du Bois to complete another year of undergraduate studies at Harvard.¹¹ This humiliation and the racist barriers at Harvard dispelled Du Bois' illusions of befriending white classmates.¹² Still, Du Bois persisted in engaging Germany where possible, for example studying Tacitus' histories of German people and slavery, titled *Germania*.¹³ Historical and contemporary Germany, it would seem, was the centerpiece of Du Bois' education.

Perhaps this was why, when Du Bois enrolled at Harvard as a doctoral student, his advisors, Albert Hart and William James, suggested that Du Bois continue his graduate study in Germany.¹⁴ Studying abroad at the time was not unheard of, and Du Bois jumped in 1890 on the scholarship opportunity of John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Negroes to "send [any young colored man] to Europe."¹⁵ Remarkably, Du Bois got rejected, and even more remarkably, over the next two years he sent several letters to the Fund, which eventually funded his study at the University of Berlin.¹⁶

To understand Du Bois' fascination with Germany that precipitated his study in Berlin, I selected relevant letters from his prolific correspondence. A theme of contrasting and paralleling Germany with

7 Barkin, 156.

8 Du Bois, *The Correspondence*, 5.

9 Lewis, 66.

10 Beck, "W. E. B. Du Bois as a Study Abroad Student in Germany, 1892-1894," *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 2, no. 1 (1996): 1.

11 Michaela Orizu, "The German influence on the life and thought of W. E. B. DuBois," *Master's Theses* (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2001): 7.

12 Manning Marable, *W. E. B. DuBois, Black Radical Democrat*, (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 13.

13 Barkin, 160.

14 *Ibid*, 161.

15 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Letter to Rutherford B. Hayes," 1890.

16 Du Bois, *The Correspondence*, 17.

the US appears throughout these texts and arrives first in Du Bois' German poem, "The New Fatherland" (1887-88), addressed to German immigrants in the US.¹⁷ Relevantly, in his Fisk commencement speech (June 1888), Du Bois celebrates his youth idol, Bismarck, as a man who unified Germany in ways that the US could follow.¹⁸ Deploying Germany as an inspiration for the US, Du Bois' first letter from abroad is addressed to the Great Barrington Sunday school and identifies the town of Eisenach, where Martin Luther preached, as Great Barrington's spiritual predecessor.¹⁹ Yet, before he received the scholarship to travel to Germany, Du Bois explained in a letter to the John F. Slater Fund (April 3, 1892) that going to Europe is necessary for him to "properly finish [his] education" and help resolve the "Negro problem," suggesting a broader racial theme within which Du Bois understood his educational mission.²⁰

Together, these sources point to the seed of Du Bois' conviction that education was a collective, anti-racist effort, planted by Great Barrington's religious and financial investment in young Du Bois. For Du Bois the scholar, "the great weight of the responsibility...rest[ed] upon the younger generation of Negroes" to obtain such an education, he writes, to be as successful as "white fellow-students."²¹ A critical component of this education for Du Bois was his grand tour of Europe, especially Germany. It was in Germany that Du Bois for the first time in his life felt, as he writes, "free from most of those iron bands that bound [him] at home," a sensation that fueled his liberation efforts by asserting that blacks do not have to inhabit the subhuman category.²² The degree to which Du Bois anticipated the racist US as a foil to Germany when at Fisk is uncanny and best shows through his fixation on German immigrants and their political leader, Bismarck.

In "The New Fatherland," Du Bois celebrates German immigrants as a force of good because he sees them as blacks' natural allies in their struggle for liberation from "southern prejudice."²³ As David Lewis claims, Du Bois benevolently saw the immigrants as "disciples of two great...religious rebels, Jan Hus and Martin Luther," and at least in

17 W. E. B. Du Bois and Ursula Marcum, "The New Fatherland," *The Journal of African American History* 91, no. 4 (2006): 450.

18 Du Bois, "Bismarck," 1.

19 Du Bois, "To Sunday School," 1892.

20 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Correspondence with Rutherford B. Hayes, Francis G. Peabody, Daniel C. Gilman: Slater Fund loan, 1890-1892," April 3, 1892.

21 Du Bois, "Letter to John F. Slater Fund." 1893.

22 Beck, 10-11.

23 Du Bois and Marcum, "The New Fatherland."

theory anti-segregationists.²⁴ Thus, Du Bois writes of a transcultural “freedom’s march [that] could not be stopped,” revealing his faith in the progress of civilization, localized in Germany and personified by Bismarck.²⁵ Repulsed by post-Reconstruction South and Harvard’s white supremacy, Du Bois wanted to witness the fruit of Bismarck’s progress firsthand and visit Berlin.

Despite cautioning against Bismarck’s blood and iron authoritarianism in his Fisk speech, Du Bois’ admiration for the politician transformed into a personal and general example that shaped his anti-racist agenda.²⁶ In this vein, David Lewis writes of Du Bois adopting an elitist veneer, or the myth of “Imperial Self,” which enabled Du Bois to be taken seriously by whites.²⁷ When staying with a host family in Eisenach, Du Bois understood himself as intimately connected to its Protestant history, but also to the conception of the US: “when Washington was President it was old; when your great-great-grandfathers stole my great-great-great-grandfather and brought him a slave to America, it was old.”²⁸ Though this letter was addressed as didaction to the pupils of the Great Barrington Sunday school, here Du Bois re-conceptualizes the US origin myth as the theft of black bodies from Africa in the context of Protestant history. Unlike nationalism or racism, it is Protestantism that Du Bois credited with the rise and consolidation of Bismarck’s empire, offering the only spiritual truth worth following. In other words, Du Bois argued that Germany and the US have always existed in parallel to each other, but that the moral and religious progress of civilization (thanks to Luther and Bismarck) has made Germany superior to the US.

In this context, Manning Marable argues that Du Bois saw himself as a “future black Bismarck,” set to unite and liberate his race.²⁹ Certainly, Du Bois’ eye-opening experience in Germany left him uniquely positioned to fight US racist institutions and follow the example of Bismarck who, in his own words, “made a nation out of a mass of bickering peoples,” suggesting a way for blacks and whites to coexist.³⁰ Although Du Bois might have justified his study abroad to the Slater Fund in civilizational terms to appeal to their notion of blacks as uncivilized, his letter explains that the injustice faced by blacks in the US could not

24 Barkin, 156.

25 Du Bois and Marcum, “The New Fatherland.”

26 Du Bois, “Bismarck,” 4.

27 Lewis, 68.

28 Du Bois, “To Sunday School.”

29 Marable, *W.E.B. DuBois*, 12.

30 Du Bois, “Bismarck,” 1.

be understood without visiting a country not built on the backs of slaves:

To the American Negro even more than to the white, is the contact with European culture of inestimable value in giving him a broad view of men and affairs, and enabling him to view the problems of his race in their true perspective.³¹

While Du Bois later became dismayed by German imperialism and the cruel Herero War in the German South West Africa, in an NAACP journal, *The Crisis*, he recalled in 1914 that “he has deep cause to love the German people. They made him believe in the essential humanity of white folk...when he was near denying it.”³² Du Bois’s at first counterintuitive love of Germany and the personal example of Bismarck thus shaped significantly his formative years, influencing his later ideas, such as the notion of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

31 Du Bois, “Letter to John F. Slater Fund.”

32 Du Bois, “The World War and the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 9 (November 1914), 29.