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*Black Reconstruction in America* by W.E.B. Du Bois

W. E. B. Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction in America* was largely written in response to the Great Depression and the class conflicts it created. Ultimately, Du Bois calls foul the interpretations of Southern history at that time. He attacks falsified claims, challenging historians by reconstructing the history of the Reconstruction Era through scientific study of history. Du Bois coins these falsified claims as the “propaganda of history”, and *Black Reconstruction in America* proves that the history of the South at the time had been a lie created by “passionate believers of black inferiority” and ones that wish to use history for “pleasure and amusement” (Du Bois, 631). Before analyzing how Du Bois restructured falsified notions of the past, it is important to note his background, and how it shaped the way he would interpret history and race struggles in America.

W.E.B Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868 in the town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Du Bois was active in the community as a youth, writing for local newspapers, and he graduated valedictorian of his high school. After high school, Dubois received his Bachelor of Arts from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1888. After spending summers teaching in African American schools in Nashville’s rural areas, Dubois entered Harvard University as a junior, receiving a bachelor of arts cum laude in 1890. From 1892 to 1894 he pursued graduate studies in history and economics at the University of Berlin, immersing himself within German culture and philosophy. German philosophers such as Max Hegel and Karl Marx significantly affected his writing. Du Bois analyzed race struggles in America to develop many of his beliefs on sociology, politics and economics. He received his doctorate in History in 1895 from Harvard. His doctoral dissertation, “The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870”, was arguably one of the first credible, historical analyses on slavery and its effects in America.

In 1935, Dubois published *Black Reconstruction in America*, which incorporates Marxist concepts to analyze the era of the southern planter society from the beginning of the slave trade through the Reconstruction Era in America. Du Bois establishes the serious class struggle in the South between the planter, the slave and poor white southerners, and how this struggle had significant effects on the shaping of the nation’s history. According to Du bois, the south pre-1865 was an oligarchic system controlled by 8,000 rich whites motivated by the systemization of slaveholding and land ownership. *Black Reconstruction in America* is an effective historical study that is used by many historians as a factual basis of Southern history. As an educated northerner, Du Bois was an outsider to the backwards society of the South. He analyzed the soul of the black southerner, and ultimately theorized in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk,* that African Americans live with a double consciousness – which he coined as “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” As one of the most successful intellectuals of his day, Du Bois was not used to this idea of double consciousness, and he uses words to implore African Americans to stand up for themselves by pursuing higher learning.

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois scientifically analyzes racial struggles in the country during the Reconstruction Era through the prism of Marxist doctrine. Du Bois explains this by first analyzing the overthrow of agrarian feudalism with a new feudalism based on monopoly in the South when he says “this new feudalism was destined to crush the small capitalist as ruthlessly as it controlled labor, and even before the panic of 1873, it was beginning to consolidate power (Du Bois, 600).” Du Bois argues that the old aristocratic and feudalistic society of the south was simply replaced with a new aristocratic system based on monopoly of industry. Once again, power was being consolidated to the few rich whites in the South, and the oligarchic system of the antebellum period was reestablished.

Through violent activities, and acts of intimidation, the white class was able to overthrow Reconstruction activity according to Du bois, re-establishing Democratic control of the South as well as re-establishing the idea of black inferiority through racial discrimination. Du Bois highlights these violent activities when discussing the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans, “he was kept from voting by force, by economic intimidation, by propaganda designed to lead him to believe that there was no salvation for him in political lines but that he must depend entirely upon thrift and the good will of his white employers”(Du Bois, 694). According to Du Bois, through disenfranchisement and intimidation of African Americans, the white south was able to regain its extraordinary hold on political influence in the region. Racism was deeply engrained in society because of Jim Crow laws and propaganda, which ultimately led to a falsified interpretation of the past by most Americans.

White Democratic control of the South ultimately led to falsified perceptions of the past, and as Du Bois phrases it, created ”propaganda of history”. According to Du Bois, school textbooks in history were written by ignorant and passionate believers of black inferiority, who ignored the role of the African American in shaping our nation’s history. Du Bois theorizes why Americans altered history when he talks about American disgust of Reconstruction, and “how the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery. The North was ashamed because it had to call in the black men to save the Union, abolish slavery and establish democracy” (Du Bois, 711). According to Du Bois, the white student was raised to have “no idea of the part which the black race has played in America”, because the nation saw the era of Reconstruction as an era of political immobility, corruption and total chaos.

Du Bois points to this ignorance and disgust by analyzing what American students were taught in textbooks through Helen Boardman’s study of textbooks pre-1935. He notes three dominant theses. First, that “all negroes were ignorant”, referring to several textbook publications claiming black ignorance during the Reconstruction Era such as the following publication from *The Leading Facts of American History* written by D.H. Montgomery: “The negroes got control of these states. They had been slaves all their lives, and were so ignorant they did not even know the letters of the alphabet. Yet they now sat in state legislatures and made the laws.”(Du Bois, 711). Second, that “all negroes were lazy, dishonest and extravagant”, noted in *America – A History of Our Country* written by William J. Long: “Legislatures were often at the mercy of Negroes, childishly ignorant, who sold their votes openly, and whose ‘loyalty’ was gained by allowing them to eat, drink and clothe themselves at the state’s expense” (Du Bois, 711-712). And finally, that “negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction” which is evident in David Saville Muzzey’s *History of the American People*, “In the exhausted states already amply ‘punished’ by the desolation of war, the rule of the Negro and his unscrupulous carpetbagger and scalawag patrons, was an orgy of extravagance, fraud and disgusting incompetency.” (Du Bois, 712)

All of this ignorance from historians contributes to the propaganda of our history according to Du bois, and completely misrepresents the black race’s role in the shaping of America. Du Bois asserts that Americans healed the terrible wounds left by the Civil War and Reconstruction by ignoring the “causes of strife and the terrible results to which sectional differences in the United States had led.” (Du Bois, 713-714). According to Du Bois, this minimized the slave controversy and caused many Americans to ignore Reconstruction because of regret and disgust; moreover, by ignoring the troubled memories of the past, Du Bois asserts that we cannot analyze history through a scientific perspective – rather through a falsified perspective in which Americans discuss pride and tradition of the past simply to inspire future generations. Du Bois supports this belief when he says, “If we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment, then we must give up the idea of history either as a science or as an art using the results of science, and admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish.” (Du Bois, 714). Furthermore, Dubois believes that white Democratic control patched up the mistakes of the South, creating a justified notion of where society was at the time; but he argues that this is a fatal flaw that many people experience when recalling history, claiming that we “simply remember things we regard as credible and inspiring.” (Du Bois, 722). However, Du Bois says we simply cannot forget the mistakes of the past and must assess the good and bad in order to accept history as a science rather than a falsified narrative of fiction.

*Black Reconstruction in America* is arguably W.E.B Dubois’ greatest historical works, effectively reporting on the racial struggle between blacks and whites in America, and revealing how the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction Era brought newfound class conflicts that were largely unidentified by historians of his time. Du Bois’ background in sociology, heavily influenced by German thinkers like Karl Marx, armed him with the tools to analyze history through a scientific perspective. Du Bois understands that it is natural human error to suppress bad memories and times of strife, but he asserts that it is the historian’s moral obligation to objectively analyze the past so future generations can avoid making the same mistakes time and time again. Du Bois’ extreme frustration with the misrepresentation of the past, especially the failure to give any credit to the African American’s role in the shaping of the history of America, inspired him to discredit false perceptions, created and held by Northerners and Southerners alike, who were unwilling to realize the dark truths of the past. As a worldly scholar and outsider of the South, Du Bois wanted to improve the social condition of the African American. *Black Reconstruction in America* not only correctly reconstructed the past—it was also an effective social critique of the times in which he lived. Du Bois died in 1963, a year before the passing of the Civil Rights Act. His workshelped mobilize the Civil Rights Movement, uniting African Americans and Civil Rights supporters to move the country forward beyond the backwards customs, laws and mores engrained in society and justified by pride and traditions of the past.