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History

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### Homework 31

In the chapter “General Strike” of *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Du Bois examines the role of enslaved people in the Civil War and the eventual abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, he argues that the transfer in enslaved people’s labor from the South to the North—their general strike against labor conditions in the South—was key to the Union victory in the Civil War and gave enslaved people agency in the fight for emancipation. Du Bois himself states, “this [the enslaved people’s] withdrawal and bestowal of his labor decided the war,” and that the U.S. government followed the footsteps of Black enslaved people with “perplexed and lagged steps” in the abolishment of slavery.<sup>1</sup> He argues that enslaved people’s transfer of labor from the South to the North made slavery central to the Civil War, as their actions benefited the North and were damaging to the South—causing a Union victory. Du Bois explains that enslaved labor moving to the North was economically disadvantageous in the South (they were losing enslaved labor—the backbone of the Southern economy) and led to division between poor and rich White people in the South. On the other hand, the transfer provided the North with a supply of labor, soldiers, and information for the Union army—their advantage over the South. This also highlights the North’s shift from being pro-slavery to abolitionist because of their dependence on fugitive slave labor in the war. Du Bois also argues that the North’s dependence on this labor for

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The General Strike,” in *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Towards the History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935), 4, 33.

their victory showed that emancipation was enslaved people's own doing—or they paved the way for the U.S. government to abolish slavery—because emancipation was economically beneficial to the North.<sup>2</sup> In sum, Du Bois's argues that the shift in enslaved people's labor force was critical to the Northern victory and established enslaved people's agency in the abolishment of slavery.

Du Bois's argument is somewhat effective, but a weakness lies in the sources he uses, as he does not consider the full context surrounding the primary source evidence from supporters of the North that he uses to support his argument. Specifically, he fails to consider the stances on slavery and abolition in the North when using supporters of the Union as evidence for his claim. An example where this occurs is when Du Bois uses firsthand accounts from Colonel Butler, a high-ranking official in the Union Army. Du Bois quotes him, saying “the colored people of Louisiana under the proper sense of the good you have done to the African race in the United States, beg leave to express to you their gratitude.”<sup>3</sup> From a surface-level read of this piece of evidence, it can be understood that enslaved people are expressing their thanks to the U.S. for their contribution to their emancipation. This piece of evidence would contradict Du Bois's argument that gives enslaved people agency in their fight for freedom, as he includes a quote from Butler that argues that enslaved people credited the U.S. for emancipation instead of it being enslaved people's own doing. Du Bois did not consider the context (in this case, bias) of Butler's claim. Butler is a White Union army general who is arguing that enslaved people gave agency to the U.S. for the abolition of slavery, something that Du Bois fails to explain, which could not contradict his argument had he included this context. In this way, Du Bois's failure to contextualize his evidence lessens the effectiveness of his argument.

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois, “The General Strike,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, quoted in Du Bois, “The General Strike,” 17.

Another similar example of where Du Bois does not contextualize his primary sources is when he quotes Eaton, who had expressed, “I hope I may never be called on again to witness the horrible scenes I saw in those first days of the history of the freedmen in the Mississippi Valley.”<sup>4</sup> Here, Eaton is referencing the harsh conditions fugitive slaves suffered through in Union camps. Du Bois uses this piece of evidence to suggest that the North was upset by the terrible conditions that enslaved people were subject to. However, Du Bois again does not consider the context of the speaker—similar to Butler, Eaton is also a high-ranking White Union official. It is important to remember the prevalence of pro slavery and racial inequality sentiments in the North. Du Bois himself addresses this, saying that in the context of fugitive slaves escaping to the North, “Often the slaves met prejudices against their color more bitter than any they had left behind.”<sup>5</sup> If the North had these prejudices ingrained within itself, then Du Bois’s argument’s ineffectiveness is also attributed to his failure to consider the beliefs and intentions of Eaton, a White Northern Union official.

In sum, Du Bois’s argument is effective yet is weakened by the lack of analysis and consideration of context and bias within his usage of primary source evidence from union members.

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<sup>4</sup> John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen*, 2, quoted in Du Bois, “The General Strike,” 19.

<sup>5</sup> John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen*, 2, quoted in Du Bois, “The General Strike,” 12.

