



The Crisis, Sept. 1917

W. E. B. DU BOIS ON THE EAST ST. LOUIS RACE RIOT OF 1917

“Of Work and Wealth,” *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, 1920; EXCERPTS

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, notably during the “Red Summer” of 1919, devastating race riots erupted across the nation at a level of mass violence unprecedented in American racial history. Many were spurred by white resentment of blacks’ increasing employment in the nation’s industrial centers outside the South, aggravated as returning white soldiers found factory jobs filled by southern black migrants, and, as in East St. Louis, Illinois, as African Americans were hired to replace unionized whites striking for higher wages. The mayhem in East St. Louis in July 1917 left nine white and one to two hundred black people dead, thousands injured, and vast swaths of black neighborhoods burned to the ground in what was later deemed a “mass lynching.”¹ After studying the aftermath of the riot firsthand for the *Crisis*, Du Bois penned a heartfelt piece weaving sociological analysis with the epic tragedy of human-wrought cataclysm. In this work, the passions of “three men” clash like Titans in East St. Louis—the heartless charging capitalist, the exploitable European immigrant (the “Unwise Man”), and the vulnerable black laborer newly arrived from the South. With apologies to Du Bois, his probing essay is excerpted here to highlight his thesis that the riot illuminated “every element of the modern economic paradox.” On the final page appears the review of *Darkwater* by journalist Robert Benchley, who departed from his usual wry style and challenged his white readers to acknowledge Du Bois’s indictment of purposeful white obliviousness to the depths of racial injustice in the land of the free.

St. Louis sprawls where mighty rivers meet—as broad as Philadelphia, but three stories high instead of two, with wider streets and dirtier atmosphere, over the dull-brown of wide, calm rivers. The city overflows into the valleys of Illinois and lies there, writhing under its grimy cloud. The other city is dusty and hot beyond all dream—a feverish Pittsburg in the Mississippi Valley—a great, ruthless, terrible thing! It is the sort that crushes man and invokes some living superman—a giant of things done, a clang of awful accomplishment.

Three men came wandering across this place.² They were neither kings nor wise men, but they came with every significance—perhaps even greater—than that which the kings bore in the days of old. There was one who came from the North—brawny and riotous with energy, a man of concentrated power, who held all the thunderbolts of modern capital in his great fists and made flour and meat, iron and steel, cunning chemicals, wood, paint and paper, transforming to endless tools a disemboweled earth. He was one who saw nothing, knew nothing, sought nothing but the making and buying of that which sells; who out from the magic of his hand rolled over miles of iron road, ton upon ton of food and metal and wood, of coal and oil and lumber, until the thronging of knotted ways in East and real St. Louis was like the red, festering ganglia of some mighty heart.

Then from the East and called by the crash of thunderbolts and forked-flame came the Unwise Man—unwise by the theft of endless ages, but as human as anything God ever made. He was the slave for the miracle maker. It was he that the thunderbolts struck and electrified into gasping energy. The rasp of his hard breathing shook the midnights of all this endless valley and the pulse of his powerful arms set the great nation to trembling.

National Humanities Center: AMERICA IN CLASS, © 2012: americainclass.org/. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), ch. 4; adapted by Du Bois from earlier publication in unspecified periodical. Punctuation and spelling modernized for clarity. *Crisis* photographs reproduced by permission of the Modernist Journals Project, Brown University and the University of Tulsa. Complete image credits at americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern/ imagecredits.htm.

¹ “Historians, journalists, and civil rights leaders who have studied the East St. Louis riot believe that more than one hundred African Americans, and perhaps as many as two hundred, were killed . . . with many of their bodies, including those of small children and infants, burned beyond human recognition . . . What happened in East St. Louis in 1917, wrote Gunnar Myrdal in *American Dilemma*, was not so much a riot as a “terrorization or massacre,” a “mass lynching.” Harper Barnes, *Never Been a Time: The 1917 Race Riot That Sparked the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Walker & Co., 2008), p. 2.

² The white industrialist, the white European immigrant laborer, and the African American migrant from the South.



Schomburg Ctr. for Research in Black Culture/NYPL

W. E. B. Du Bois in his office at the *Crisis*, n.d.

And then, at last, out of the South, like a still, small voice, came the third man—black, with great eyes and greater memories; hesitantly eager and yet with the infinite softness and ancient calm which come from that eternal race whose history is not the history of a day, but of endless ages. Here, surely, was fit meeting-place for these curiously intent forces, for these epoch-making and age-twisting forces, for these human feet on their superhuman errands.

...

So the Unwise Men pouring out of the East—falling, scrambling, rushing into America at the rate of a million a year—ran, walked, and crawled to this maelstrom of the workers. They garnered higher wage than ever they had before, but not all of it came in cash. A part, and an insidious part, was given to them transmuted into whiskey, prostitutes, and games of chance. They laughed and disported themselves. God! Had not their mothers wept enough? It was a good town. There was no veil of hypocrisy here, but a wickedness, frank, ungilded, and open. To be sure, there were things sometimes to reveal the basic savagery and thin veneer. Once, for instance, a man was lynched for brawling on the public square of the county seat; once a mayor who sought to “clean up” was publicly assassinated; always there was theft and rumors of theft, until St. Clair County was a-hissing in good men’s ears; but always, too, there were good wages and jolly hoodlums and unchecked wassail of Saturday nights. Gamblers, big and little, rioted in East St. Louis. The little gamblers used cards and roulette wheels and filched the weekly wage of the workers. The greater gamblers used meat and iron and undid the foundations of the world. All the gods of chance flaunted their wild raiment here, above the brown flood of the Mississippi.

Then the world changed; then civilization, built for culture, rebuilt itself for wilful murder in Europe, Asia, America, and the Southern Seas. Hands that made food made powder, and iron for railways was iron for guns. The wants of common men were forgotten before the groan of giants. Streams of gold, lost from the world’s workers, filtered and trickled into the hands of gamblers and put new power into the thunderbolts of East St. Louis.

Wages had been growing before the World War. Slowly but remorselessly the skilled and intelligent, banding themselves, had threatened the coffers of the mighty, and slowly the mighty had disgorged. Even the common workers, the poor and unlettered, had again and again gripped the sills of the city walls and pulled themselves to their chins; but, alas! there were so many hands and so many mouths and the feet of the Disinherited kept coming across the wet paths of the sea to this old El Dorado.³

³ *El Dorado*: legendary realm of great wealth, set in the jungle of northern South America, sought by Spanish explorers of the New World.

War brought subtle changes. Wages stood still while prices fattened. It was not that the white American worker was threatened with starvation, but it was what was, after all, a more important question—whether or not he should lose his front-room and victrola and even the dream of a Ford car.

There came a whirling and scrambling among the workers—they fought each other; they climbed on each others' backs. The skilled and intelligent, banding themselves even better than before, bargained with the men of might and held them by bitter threats; the less skilled and more ignorant seethed at the bottom and tried, as of old, to bring it about that the ignorant and unlettered should learn to stand together against both capital and skilled labor.

It was here that there came out of the East a beam of unearthly light—a triumph of possible good in evil so strange that the workers hardly believed it. Slowly they saw the gates of Ellis Island closing, slowly the footsteps of the yearly million men became fainter and fainter, until the stream of immigrants overseas was stopped by the shadow of death at the very time when new murder opened new markets over all the world to American industry; and the giants with the thunderbolts stamped and raged and peered out across the world and called for men and evermore—men!

The Unwise Men laughed and squeezed reluctant dollars out of the fists of the mighty and saw in their dream the vision of a day when labor, as they knew it, should come into its own; saw this day and saw it with justice and with right, save for one thing, and that was the sound of the moan of the Disinherited, who still lay without the walls. When they heard this moan and saw that it came not across the seas, they were at first amazed and said it was not true; and then they were mad and said it should not be. Quickly they turned and looked into the red blackness of the South and in their hearts were fear and hate!

What did they see? They saw something at which they had been taught to laugh and make sport; they saw that which the heading of every newspaper column, the lie of every cub reporter, the exaggeration of every press dispatch, and the distortion of every speech and book had taught them was a mass of despicable men, inhuman; at best, laughable; at worst, the meat of mobs and fury.

What did they see? They saw nine and one-half millions of human beings. They saw the spawn of slavery, ignorant by law and by deviltry, crushed by insult and debauched by systematic and criminal injustice. They saw a people whose helpless women have been raped by thousands and whose men lynched by hundreds in the face of a sneering world. They saw a people with heads bloody, but unbowed, working faithfully at wages fifty per cent. lower than the wages of the nation and under conditions which shame civilization, saving homes, training children, hoping against hope. They saw the greatest industrial miracle of modern days—slaves transforming themselves to freemen and climbing out of perdition by their own efforts, despite the most contemptible opposition God ever saw—they saw all this and what they saw the distraught employers of America saw, too.



Library of Congress

Immigrants from Italy arriving at Ellis Island, 1911



Florida State Archives

Black travelers in segregated waiting room, railroad depot, Jacksonville, Florida, 1921

The North called to the South. A scream of rage went up from the cotton monopolists and industrial barons of the new South. Who was this who dared to “interfere” with their labor? Who sought to own their black slaves but they? Who honored and loved “niggers” as they did?

They mobilized all the machinery of modern oppression: taxes, city ordinances, licenses, state laws, municipal regulations, wholesale police arrests and, of course, the peculiarly Southern method of the mob and the lyncher. They appealed frantically to the United States Government; they groveled on their knees and shed wild tears at the “suffering” of their poor, misguided black friends, and yet, despite this, the Northern employers simply had to offer two and three dollars a day and from one-quarter to one-half a million dark workers arose and poured themselves into the North. They went to the mines of West Virginia, because war needs coal; they went to the industries of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, because war needs ships and iron; they went to the automobiles of Detroit and the load-carrying of Chicago; and they went to East St. Louis.

Now there came fear in the hearts of the Unwise Men. It was not that their wages were lowered—they went even higher. They received, not simply, a living wage, but a wage that paid for some of the decencies, and, in East St. Louis, many of the indecencies of life. What they feared was not deprivation of the things they were used to and the shadow of poverty, but rather the definite death of their rising dreams. But if fear was newborn in the hearts of the Unwise Men, the black man was born in a house of fear; to him poverty of the ugliest and straitest type was father, mother, and blood-brother. He was slipping stealthily northward to escape hunger and insult, the hand of oppression, and the shadow of death.

Here, then, in the wide valley which Father Marquette saw peaceful and golden, lazy with fruit and river, half-asleep beneath the nod of God—here, then, was staged every element for human tragedy, every element of the modern economic paradox.

Ah! That hot, wide plain of East St. Louis is a gripping thing. The rivers are dirty with sweat and toil and lip, like lakes, along the low and burdened shores; flatboats ramble and thread among them, and above the steamers bridges swing on great arches of steel, striding with mighty grace from shore to shore. Everywhere are brick kennel,—tall, black and red chimneys, tongues of flame. The ground is littered with cars and iron, tracks and trucks, boxes and crates, metals and coal and rubber. Nature-defying cranes, grim elevators rise above pile on pile of black and grimy lumber. And ever below is the water—wide and silent, gray-brown and yellow.

This is the stage for the tragedy: the armored might of the modern world urged by the bloody needs of the world wants, fevered today by a fabulous vision of gain and needing only hands, hands, hands! Fear of loss and greed of gain in the hearts of the giants; the clustered cunning of the modern workman, skilled as artificer and skilled in



Leslie Rogers, “Great Scot! What Have I Done?”
The Chicago Defender (African American newspaper)
February 17, 1923

**This is the stage for the tragedy:
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the rhythm of the habit of work, tasting the world's good and panting for more; fear of poverty and hate of "scabs" in the hearts of the workers; the dumb yearning in the hearts of the oppressed; the echo of laughter heard at the foot of the Pyramids; the faithful, plodding slouch of the laborers; fear of the Shadow of Death in the hearts of black men.

We ask, and perhaps there is no answer, how far may the captain of the world's industry do his deeds, despite the grinding tragedy of its doing? How far may men fight for the beginning of comfort, out beyond the horrid shadow of poverty, at the cost of starving other and what the world calls lesser men? How far may those who reach up out of the slime that fills the pits of the world's damned compel men with loaves to divide with men who starve?

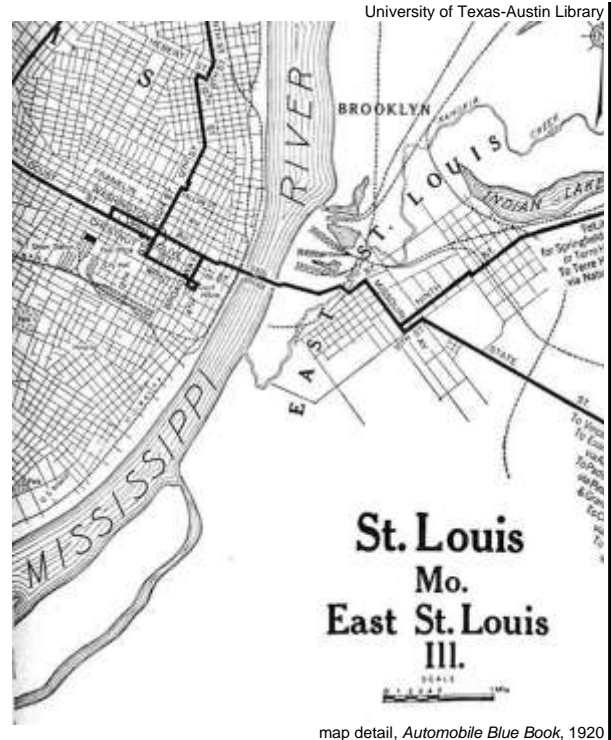
The answers to these questions are hard, but yet one answer looms above all—justice lies with the lowest; the plight of the lowest man—the plight of the black man—deserves the first answer, and the plight of the giants of industry, the last.

Little cared East St. Louis for all this bandying of human problems, so long as its grocers and saloon-keepers flourished and its industries steamed and screamed and smoked and its bankers grew rich. Stupidity, license, and graft sat enthroned in the City Hall. The new black folk were exploited as cheerfully as white Polacks and Italians; the rent of shacks mounted merrily, the street car lines counted gleeful gains, and the crimes of white men and black men flourished in the dark. The high and skilled and smart climbed on the bent backs of the ignorant; harder the mass of laborers strove to unionize their fellows and to bargain with employers.

Nor were the new blacks fools. They had no love for nothings in labor; they had no wish to make their fellows' wage envelopes smaller, but they were determined to make their own larger. They, too, were willing to join in the new union movement. But the unions did not want them. Just as employers monopolized meat and steel, so they sought to monopolize labor and beat a giant's bargain. In the higher trades they succeeded. The best electrician in the city was refused admittance to the union and driven from the town because he was black. No black builder, printer, or machinist could join a union or work in East St. Louis, no matter what his skill or character. But out of the stink of the stockyards and the dust of the aluminum works and the sweat of the lumber yards the willing blacks could not be kept.

They were invited to join unions of the laborers here and they joined. White workers and black workers struck at the aluminum works in the fall and won higher wages and better hours; then again in the spring they struck to make bargaining compulsory for the employer, but this time they fronted new things. The conflagration of war had spread to America; government and court stepped in and ordered no hesitation, no strikes; the work must go on.

Deeper was the call for workers. Black men poured in and red anger flamed in the hearts of the white workers. The anger was against the wielders of the thunderbolts, but here it was impotent because employers stood with the hand of the government before their faces; it was against entrenched union labor, which had risen on the backs of the unskilled and unintelligent and on the backs of those whom for any reason of race or prejudice or chicane they could beat beyond the bars of competition; and finally the anger of the mass of white workers was turned toward these new black interlopers, who seemed to come to spoil their last dream of a great monopoly of common labor.



map detail, *Automobile Blue Book*, 1920

These angers flamed and the union leaders, fearing their fury and knowing their own guilt, not only in the larger and subtler matter of bidding their way to power across the weakness of their less fortunate fellows, but also conscious of their part in making East St. Louis a miserable town of liquor and lust, leaped quickly to ward the gathering thunder from their own heads. The thing they wanted was even at their hands: here were black men, guilty not only of bidding for jobs which white men could have held at war prices, even if they could not fill, but also guilty of being black! It was at this blackness that the



advertisement for the National Association for the Promotion of Labor Unionism among Negroes
The Messenger (African American periodical), February 1922

unions pointed the accusing finger. It was here that they committed the unpardonable crime. It was here that they entered the Shadow of Hell, where suddenly from a fight for wage and protection against industrial oppression East St. Louis became the center of the oldest and nastiest form of human oppression—race hatred.

The whole situation lent itself to this terrible transformation. Everything in the history of the United States, from slavery to Sunday supplements, from disfranchisement to residence segregation, from “Jim-Crow” cars to a “Jim-Crow” army draft—all this history of discrimination and insult festered to make men think and willing to think that the venting of their unbridled anger against 12,000,000 humble, upstriving workers was a way of settling the industrial tangle of the ages. It was the logic of the broken plate, which, seared of old across its pattern, cracks never again, save along the old destruction.

So hell flamed in East St. Louis! The white men drove even black union men out of their unions and when the black men, beaten by night and assaulted, flew to arms and shot back at the marauders, five thousand rioters arose and surged like a crested stormwave, from noonday until midnight; they killed and beat and murdered; they dashed out the brains of children and stripped off the clothes of women; they drove victims into the flames and hanged the helpless to the lighting poles. Fathers were killed before the faces of mothers; children were burned; heads were cut off with axes; pregnant women crawled and spawned in dark, wet fields; thieves went through houses and firebrands followed; bodies were thrown from bridges; and rocks and bricks flew through the air.

The Negroes fought. They grappled with the mob like beasts at bay. They drove them back from the thickest cluster of their homes and piled the white dead on the street, but the cunning mob caught the black men between the factories and their homes, where they knew they were armed only with their dinner pails. Firemen, policemen, and militiamen stood with hanging hands or even joined eagerly with the mob.

It was the old world horror come to life again: all that Jews suffered in Spain and Poland; all that peasants suffered in France, and Indians in Calcutta; all that aroused human devilry had accomplished in ages past they did in East St. Louis, while the rags of six thousand half-naked black men and women fluttered across the bridges of the calm Mississippi.

The white South laughed—it was infinitely funny—the “niggers” who had gone North to escape

slavery and lynching had met the fury of the mob which they had fled. Delegations rushed North from Mississippi and Texas, with suspicious timeliness and with great-hearted offers to take these workers back to a lesser hell. The man from Greenville, Mississippi, who wanted a thousand got six, because, after all, the end was not so simple.



"Looking for bodies of victims. Six were found here." *The Crisis*, Sept. 1917 [reprinted from the *St. Louis Star*]

No, the end was not simple. On the contrary, the problem raised by East St. Louis was curiously complex. The ordinary American, tired of the persistence of "the Negro problem," sees only another anti-Negro mob and wonders, not when we shall settle this problem, but when we shall be well rid of it. The student of social things sees another mile-post in the triumphant march of union labor; he is sorry that blood and rapine should mark its march—but, what will you? War is life!

Despite these smug reasonings the bare facts were these: East St. Louis, a great industrial center, lost 5,000 laborers—good, honest, hard-working laborers. It was not the criminals, either black or white, who were driven from East St. Louis. They are still there. They will stay there. But half the honest black laborers were gone. The crippled ranks of industrial organization in the mid-Mississippi Valley cannot be recruited from Ellis Island, because in Europe men are dead and maimed, and restoration, when restoration comes, will raise a European demand for labor such as this age has never seen. The vision of industrial supremacy has come to the giants who lead American industry and finance. But it can never be realized unless the laborers are here to do the work—the skilled laborers, the common laborers, the willing laborers, the well-paid laborers. The present forces, organized however cunningly, are not large enough to do what America wants; but there is another group of laborers, 12,000,000 strong, the natural heirs, by every logic of justice, to the fruits of America's industrial advance. They will be used simply because they must be used—but their using means East St. Louis!

Eastward from St. Louis lie great centers, like Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburg, Philadelphia, and New York; in every one of these and in lesser centers there is not only the industrial unrest of war and revolutionized work, but there is the call for workers, the coming of black folk, and the deliberate effort to divert the thoughts of men, and particularly of workingmen, into channels of race hatred against blacks. In every one of these centers what happened in East St. Louis has been attempted, with more or less success. Yet the American Negroes stand today as the greatest strategic group in the world. Their services are indispensable, their temper and character are fine, and their souls have seen a vision more beautiful than any other mass of workers. They may win back culture to the world if their strength can be used with the forces of the world that make for justice and not against the hidden hates that fight for barbarism. For fight they must and fight they will!

Robert Benchley, "Darkwater," 1920

review of W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, 1920

We have so many, many problems in America. Books are constantly being written offering solutions for them, but still they persist.

There are volumes on auction bridge, family budgets and mind-training. A great many people have ideas on what should be done to relieve the country of certain undesirable persons who have displayed a lack of sympathy with American institutions. (As if American institutions needed sympathy!) And some of the more generous-minded among us are writing books showing our duty to the struggling young nationalities of Europe. It is bewildering to be confronted by all these problems, each demanding intelligent solution.

Little wonder, then, that we have no time for writing books on the one problem which is exclusively our own. With so many wrongs in the world to be righted, who can blame us for overlooking the one tragic wrong which lies at our door? With so many heathen to whom the word of God must be brought and so many wild revolutionists in whom must be instilled a respect for law and order, is it strange that we should ourselves sometimes lump the word of God and the principles of law and order together under the head of "sentimentality" and shrug our shoulders? Justice in the abstract is our aim—any American will tell you that—so why haggle over details and insist on justice for the negro?

But W.E.B. Du Bois does insist on justice for the negro, and in his book *Darkwater* (Harcourt, Brace & Co.) his voice rings out in a bitter warning through the complacent quiet which usually reigns around this problem of America. Mr. Du Bois seems to forget that we have the affairs of a great many people to attend to and persists in calling our attention to this affair of our own. And what is worse, in the minds of all well-bred persons he does not do it at all politely. He seems to be quite distressed about something.

Maybe it is because he finds himself, a man of superior mind and of sensitive spirit who is a graduate of Harvard, a professor and a sincere worker for the betterment of mankind, relegated to an inferior order by many men and women who are obviously his inferiors, simply because he happens to differ from them in the color of his skin. Maybe it is because he sees the people of his own race who have not had his advantages (if a negro may ever be said to have received an advantage) being crowded into an ignominious spiritual serfdom equally as bad as the physical serfdom from which they were so recently freed. Maybe it is because of these things that Mr. Du Bois seems overwrought.

Or perhaps it is because he reads each day of how jealous we are, as a Nation, of the sanctity of our Constitution, how we revere it and draw a flashing sword against its detractors, and then sees this very Constitution being flouted as a matter of course in those districts where the amendment giving the negroes a right to vote is popularly considered one of the five funniest jokes in the world.

Perhaps he hears candidates for office insisting on a reign of law or a plea for order above all things, by some sentimentalist or other, or public speakers advising those who have not respect for American institutions to go back whence they came, and then sees whole sections of the country violating every principle of law and order and mocking American institutions for the sake of teaching a "nigger" his place.

Perhaps during the war he heard of the bloody crimes of our enemies, and saw preachers and editors and statesmen stand aghast at the barbaric atrocities which won for the German the name of Hun, and then looked toward his own people and saw them being burned, disembowelled and tortured with a civic unanimity and tacit legal sanction which made the word Hun sound weak.

Perhaps he has heard it boasted that in America every man who is honest, industrious and intelligent has a good chance to win out, and has seen honest, industrious and intelligent men whose skins are black stopped short by a wall so high and so thick that all they can do, on having reached that far, is to bow their heads and go slowly back.

Any one of these reasons should have been sufficient for having written *Darkwater*.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Du Bois should have raised this question of our own responsibility just at this time when we were showing off so nicely. It may remind someone that instead of taking over a protectorate of Armenia we might better take over a protectorate of the State of Georgia, which yearly leads the proud list of lynchers. But then, there will not be enough people who see Mr. Du Bois's book to cause any great national movement, so we are quite sure, for the time being, of being able to devote our energies to the solution of our other problems.

Don't forget, therefore, to write your Congressman about a universal daylight-saving bill, and give a little thought, if you can, to the question of the vehicular tunnel.

[original publication unidentified; reprinted in Benchley, *Love Conquers All*, essay and review collection, 1922]