

**AMERICAN LIVES** **W. E. B. Du Bois**  
*Scholar, Activist, Critic*

*“The world was thinking wrong about race because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation.”—W. E. B. Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn (1940)*

W. E. B. Du Bois’s ideas evolved over his long career. In one thing, however, he was constant. He wanted to highlight the contributions and condition of African Americans because, he once said, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”

Du Bois (1868–1963), born in Massachusetts, received a shock when he reached Fisk University, an all-black college in Nashville, Tennessee. There he experienced for the first time segregation in the South. He later wrote that only an African American “going into the South for the first time can have any conception of [segregation’s] barbarism.” After graduation from Fisk, he attended Harvard University, where he learned to question accepted ideas.

Du Bois began to teach while he continued work for his Ph.D., which he was awarded in 1895. In his doctoral dissertation, he argued that the slave trade was ended not for moral reasons, but for economic ones. A brilliant study, it made his name as a scholar. Du Bois’s next book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, was an equally impressive work of sociology. In it, Du Bois argued forcefully against the idea—quite common at the time—that racial differences were based on genetic traits.

By the turn of the century, Du Bois began a period of political activism. Joining with 28 other African-American intellectuals, he founded the Niagara Movement. This group rejected the views of Booker T. Washington, a leading African American. Washington urged blacks to pursue job training and use economic advances to secure political rights. The Niagara Movement disagreed, flatly stating, “We want full manhood suffrage and we want it now.” Du Bois criticized Washington even though Atlanta University, where he worked, depended on financial aid from Washington supporters.

This movement was taken into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, formed in 1909. Du Bois left Atlanta University to become editor of the NAACP’s jour-

nal, *Crisis*. He held the position for 25 years and used it to protest lynching and the denial of rights to African Americans, to celebrate the achievements of African culture, and to promote African-American art. From time to time, he took positions opposed by the NAACP.

One cause of these differences was Du Bois’s broadening views and growing socialism. World War I convinced him that the root of African Americans’ problems was white imperialism. Slavery and segregation, in this view, were just one aspect of this imperialism, which was also suppressing people of color around the world. Du Bois also began to believe that economic condition determined political status. He urged African Americans to adopt economic segregation from mainstream American life. The NAACP, though, supported integration. Eventually, these differences led him to resign from editing *Crisis*.

Du Bois still had almost three decades of work remaining. In his later writings, he continued to broaden his concern to include the oppressed around the world, especially people of color. He defined Karl Marx’s term—the proletariat—as more than just white laborers in Europe and America. This class was “overwhelmingly of the darker workers of Asia, Africa, the islands of the sea, and South Central America . . . who are supporting a superstructure of wealth, luxury, and extravagance.” His radical views led to his arrest in the anticommunist hysteria of the 1950s. But Du Bois refused to stop speaking out. In his last major work, a three-novel series called *The Black Flame*, he used fiction to analyze the African-American experience from the end of Reconstruction to the postwar period.

## Questions

1. Why was Du Bois startled when he went to Fisk University?
2. What incidents show Du Bois’s independence of mind?
3. How did Du Bois’s ideas change over time?