Review: [Untitled]

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W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919. by David Levering Lewis
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Book Reviews

W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919. By David Levering Lewis. (New York: Holt, 1993. xvi, 735 pp. $35.00, ISBN 0-8050-2621-5.)

A reader with warm memories of David Levering Lewis's effervescent *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981) approaches this first half of Lewis's two-volume study of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois anticipating a book as rich and as deep as the best biographies, for instance, Martin B. Duberman's highly impressive *Paul Robeson* (1988). I was disappointed; *W. E. B. Du Bois* did not fulfill my expectations.

W. E. B. Du Bois is a richly informative but often frustrating book. Reading it is work, not pleasure. While it presents an intriguingly complex portrait of Du Bois, a reader's appreciation of Du Bois's life is sometimes hindered by Lewis's peculiar interpretive speculations. Lewis has done excellent work in filling in the gaps and correcting the inaccuracies that mar Du Bois's own autobiographies, but a more energetic editorial hand would have saved Lewis from missteps both large and small and might have made possible a more succinct one-volume portrait that would be far more accessible and widely read than this two-volume work.

Lewis's greatest challenges in *W. E. B. Du Bois* are to paint a clear picture of Du Bois the man and to present a convincing portrait of the importance of his work. In my estimation, Lewis succeeds far better at the first of these tasks than at the second.

Lewis is at his best in constructing an impressively detailed account of Du Bois's childhood and school years. Lewis may devote more attention to Du Bois's ancestors than many readers will think necessary, but Lewis's sleuthing into Du Bois's tangled and sometimes troubled family roots is undeniably the greatest scholarly achievement of this volume. Lewis also persuasively sketches Du Bois's impressive academic precocity from high school through Fisk, Harvard, and Berlin and successfully captures Du Bois's deep frustration with the intense academic racism of the 1890s and 1900s, which left him with insultingly few employment opportunities.

Slowly at first, and then more frequently in discussion of the years after Du Bois left his Atlanta University professorship in 1910 to join the staff of the nascent National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Lewis focuses upon the unpleasant but inescapable fact that Du Bois could be thoroughly dislikable. "He would never be able to make friends easily, especially with men," Lewis observes early on, and even in his graduate school years, Du Bois "was so quick to anticipate condescension that chance interracial encounters usually fizzled." But it was Du Bois's "deep-seated elitism" and "aristocratic proclivities," Lewis emphasizes, not racial defensiveness, that characterized Du Bois's "perverse arrogance" and "imperial personality." Sympathetic NAACP associate Mary White Ovington chided Du Bois for exhibiting such "an atmosphere of antagonism" that "even some of your most intimate friends feel toward you a mingled affection and resentment," and after NAACP colleague Joel Spingarn rebuked Du Bois for being "childish and difficult," even Du Bois himself acknowledged that his personality was "a difficult one to endure." Given his past experiences in life, Du Bois added, "it would be miraculous if I came through normal and unwarped." The cumulative impact of Lewis's portrait, however, especially with regard to Du Bois's relative disinterest in his wife and children, leaves a reader hard pressed to develop much empathy for Lewis's subject.

Far more significant, however, are both Du Bois's professional work and Lewis's sometimes disappointing treatment of it. Lewis does an excellent job of detailing how important Du Bois's creation and editing of the *Crisis* was in stimulating black activism during the 1910s, but when it comes to Du Bois's scholarly and quasi-scholarly works such as *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Lewis's presentation often leaves much to be desired. Du Bois's reputation and importance rest largely if not entirely upon his published trove, and for Lewis to make good on his grandiose estimation of Du Bois's importance that is explicit in his subtitle, he needs to have devoted far more attention to the content and impact of Du Bois's publications than he does. Only in passing assertions—"the ten or more years when the life and destiny of Africans in America merged inseparably with his own"—does Lewis attempt to advance his "biography of a race" claim, and at more thoughtful moments Lewis speaks with acerbity of Du Bois's "certitude" that "there was no real distinction to be drawn between what was important to him and what was of value to those he claimed to speak for."

Lewis nicely highlights the importance of Du Bois's August 1897 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "Strivings of the Negro People" (later reworked as the opening chapter of *Souls*) in the development of Du Bois's national reputation, but his inadequate treatment of *Souls* itself, and especially of the public impact of *Souls,* is one of the most disappointing aspects of this book. Lewis asserts that the publication of *Souls* "was one of those events epochally dividing history into a before and an after," but he not only fails to devote any attention whatsoever to some of the most moving and substantively intriguing sections of the book (such as chapters 7 and 8 on Dougherty County, Georgia), he also fails to mount an adequate effort to depict the book's "epochal" impact. Indeed, Lewis's footnotes seem to indicate that rather than examining the contemporaneous reviews of *Souls* in full, he has relied instead upon characterizations and quotations drawn from them by Du Bois scholar Herbert Aptheker.

But far and away the most troubling aspect of *W. E. B. Du Bois* is the frequency with which Lewis speculates in ways that reach well beyond available evidence. Lewis is almost cavalierly frank about doing so—"No evidence having been found to substantiate any of these plausible speculations," he offers at one juncture—and in one press interview Lewis volunteered, "It's no disgrace to gossip a little bit and tart up the language a little bit. That's what I tried to do" (*Chicago Tribune,* February 14, 1994). For this reader, however, the cumulative impact of such passages upon one's confidence in Lewis's underlying interpretations is significant and severe.

More often than not, Lewis's speculative overreachings concern sex. One passing figure is characterized as "probably a paying boarder or possibly even part of a menage à trois"; with one colleague Du Bois "may well have crossed the line dividing compassion from adultery"; a photo caption suggestively labels Jessie Fauset an "intimate friend" of Du Bois's, even though the matter is never discussed in the text. These problems are most obtrusive in Lewis's treatment of Du Bois's young adulthood; one sentence even observes, "Whether or not those compensations were ever sexual (introducing a brittle young male to forbidden delights among sultry AME Zion wives and widows) is unknown, though unlikely." Whatever that comment may tell us about Lewis, it tells us nothing about Du Bois.

At his worst, Lewis speculates about how resentful, "evasive, ambivalent, and wretched" Du Bois's subconscious feelings toward his mother must have become and cites "the subconscious castration complex that afflicts males who figuratively violate the paternal taboo against possession of the mother." Lewis says nothing at all in *W. E. B. Du Bois* about why he offers these remarks, but in one press interview (*Washington Post,* December 13, 1993) Lewis explained how as part of his research, he, in the character of Du Bois, regularly visited a psychiatrist: "I'd arrive, ring the bell, he'd open the door and I'd say, 'I'm W. E. B. Du Bois.' And he'd say, 'Come over, come to the couch.' And I talked as I thought Du Bois would. And I talked about my mother and my father—whom I [Du Bois] had never known

. . . and as we were talking, I remember standing up and saying, 'I've got it!' And it had to do with the castration complex, the whole business of the son wanting to possess the mother."

Lewis also told the *Post* what his psychiatrist said about the venture: "Professionally, this is pretty daft."

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Crime and Punishment in American History. By Lawrence M. Friedman. (New York: Basic Books, 1993. xii, 577 pp. $30.00, ISBN 0-465-01461-5.)

Publication of Lawrence M. Friedman's *Crime and Punishment in American History* coincided with a new wave of hysteria over crime. Congress and state legislatures have considered and in some cases enacted draconic anticrime measures, including the "three strikes and you're out" law mandating life imprisonment for persons convicted of a third violent crime.

We might be better served if all elected officials were sentenced to reading Friedman's book. He concludes with the observation that "whatever the public may think, no solution to the problem of crime is in sight." Today's quick-fix proposals—more police, longer sentences—are no more likely to reduce crime than were similar measures in the past. The "lesson" of history, Friedman argues, is that criminal behavior is rooted in "culture" and not in the criminal justice system. Our present crime problem is a result of deep-seated changes in the attitudes and behavior of the general population. In particular, he argues, there seems to have been in recent years a loosening of traditional restraints on antisocial behavior.

This sobering message comes at the end of a comprehensive survey of criminal justice history that is likely to remain the standard work on the subject for some time. Friedman's account is both broad in scope and rich in evocative detail. He offers a "social history" of "a working system" of criminal justice that covers the development of criminal justice agencies, the changing scope of the criminal law, and the changing forms of criminal behavior. He covers not just predatory street crime, the focus of public hysteria, but also the new forms of regulatory crime in modern society.

A recurring theme in this history is the seemingly permanent public unhappiness with the criminal justice system. None of the periodic outbursts of reform has produced satisfactory results. This is not to say that nothing ever changes. Friedman explores important changes within the criminal justice system, particularly the decline of the jury trial and its replacement with an administrative system of justice that relies on negotiated guilty pleas.

The principal weakness of this generally excellent book relates to the definition of the scope of the subject itself. Friedman makes an important distinction between crime and criminal justice, advising the reader that this book is primarily about the latter: the creation, development, administration, and reform of criminal justice agencies. In other words, this book is primarily about the official response to crime rather than crime itself. His decision was dictated in large part by necessity, since the bulk of the existing scholarly literature deals with the machinery of justice rather than the changing forms of criminal behavior.

In the end, however, this distinction creates a serious problem in explaining the place of crime and criminal justice in American history. After writing a history of the administration of justice, he concludes that the justice system has little if any impact on crime. Criminal behavior, which is why we have a criminal justice system in the first place, is rooted in culture. But he has written a history neither of crime nor of the underlying cultural changes that produce it. As a consequence, we are left with something akin to the proverbial production of *Hamlet* without the prince.

The real problem is not Friedman's treatment of the subject, but the field of criminal justice history as an academic discipline. The sad truth is that it has not developed as it might have. Friedman notes that the subject of crime, despite enormous public concern, remains "badly neglected" by historians. The overall body of literature is "fairly small"; there is not a terribly vigorous debate over theme