Title: The Ground of Empowerment: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Vision of Africa's Past

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Abstract (summary):
Scholars have examined many aspects of W. E. B. Du Bois's project of empowering oppressed peoples in the United States and around the world. However they have treated in only a fragmentary way one of the principal strategies that he used to counter hegemonic ideologies of African and African American inferiority. That strategy was to turn to the evidence of history. Here I argue that Du Bois, alerted by Franz Boas to Africans' historical attainments, confronted claims made by European Americans that Africans and a fortiori African Americans lacked any achievement independent of European or other foreign influence. Du Bois linked African Americans to Africa and laid out repeatedly and in detail a narrative of autonomous African historical accomplishment. I demonstrate that his approach to the history of Africa constituted a radical departure from the treatment of Africa presented by scholars located in the mainstream of contemporary anglophone academic thought. I argue that while his vision of Africa's history did not effect any significant shift in scholarly orthodoxy, it played a crucial role, at a grave juncture in race relations in the United States, in helping to equip young African Americans with the psychological resources necessary to challenge white supremacist systems. I contend that his vision of African civilizational achievement situates him in a tradition of ideological struggle waged by African Americans from the 1800s through the twenty-first century and that in regard to utilizing Africa’s past as the ground of empowerment the relationship of his approach with that of Afrocentrist scholars is marked by both disjunctures and continuities.

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Although Du Bois had originally believed that social science could provide the knowledge to solve the race problem, he gradually came to the conclusion that in a climate of virulent racism, expressed in such evils as lynching, peonage, disfranchisement, Jim Crow segregation laws, and race riots, social change could be accomplished only through agitation and protest. Du Bois was a leader of the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 and the architect of four Pan-African Congresses held between 1919 and 1927. Second, he articulated a cultural nationalism. As the editor of The Crisis, he encouraged the development of black literature and art and urged his readers to see “Beauty in Black.”