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5 The Shaping of We-Group Identities in the African American Community

A Perspective of Figurational Sociology on the Cultural Imaginary

If *we* can't cry for the Nation, then who? Because who else draws their grief and consternation from a larger knowledge or from a deeper and more desperate hope? And who've paid more in trying to achieve their better promise?

RALPH ELLISON, THREE DAYS BEFORE THE SHOOTING . . .

The Concept of Collective Identity in Figurational Sociology

Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as "imagined community" is based on an understanding of the relation of society and individual which has been very common in Western thinking since the Renaissance. As the sociologist Norbert Elias explains in his study *The Society of Individuals*, we have come to refer "to the single human being as if he or she were an entity existing in complete isolation," while society "is understood either as a mere accumulation, an additive and unstructured collection of many individual people, or as an object existing beyond individuals" (vii). In contrast, Elias doubts the adequacy of "this form of I-identity, the perception of one's own person as a we-less I" (198). On the basis of a figurational theory of sociology, Elias even claims that there is no I-identity without a we-identity. Yet as a sociologist who analyzes long-term processes, he draws attention to historical changes in the we-I balance, and shows that in the course of the last centuries the we-I balance has tilted more and more toward I-identity. To Elias, Descartes's famous formula *cogito, ergo sum* turns the philosopher into a pioneer of this shift toward individualization and the humanists of the Renaissance into "one of the earliest groups of people whose personal achievements and character traits gave them opportunities to rise to respected social posi-

tions" (197). In addition to such historical changes that are indicative of changes in the social structure, there are also national differences in the we-I balance. As Stephen Mennell puts it in his study *The American Civilizing Process*, in which he explores Elias's theory of the civilizing process by applying it to the development of the United States: "Tocqueville employed the concept of 'individualism' for the purpose of characterizing the Americans . . . , but this statement of Tocqueville's elegantly captures an American proneness to what Elias calls the *homo clausus* conception of human beings—a mode of self-experience as a 'closed person,' as a single isolated individual separate from other individuals" (302). In fact, one of the reasons why figurational sociology has received less attention in the United States than in Europe may be its insistence on the interdependence of society and individual.[1]

In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias defined "figuration" as "the web of interdependences formed among human beings and which connects them: that is to say, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent persons" (249). Elias's concept of figuration can be compared to Pierre Bourdieu's "thoroughgoing *relationalism* which grasps both objective and subjective reality in the form of mutually interpenetrating systems of relations" (Wacquant 320). While it seems obvious that such overcoming of the dualisms of micro/macro and agency/structure provides a useful methodological tool for the debate of group-identities, there is yet another essential feature of figurational and relational sociology that offers valuable insights into the structure of (imagined) communities: it is important to note that figurational sociology always takes into account relations of competition and power between groups. According to Elias, the driving forces of the development that he investigated in *The Civilizing Process* are competition and the ensuing power struggles between interdependent groups. Likewise, the social figuration he came to define as "the established" and "the outsiders" is determined by the power differential that, in turn, is shaped by factors such as group cohesion, which the long-term inhabitants use to protect their privileges against the newcomers. Thus when Elias—a German Jew who had been driven into exile—tried to understand the "barbarization" of German society (*Civilizing Process* 302), he did so by analyzing the German national habitus emerging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result of fierce power struggles between Germany's gate-keeping "good society" and the lower middle class, which aspired to a share of the elite's social distinction of being capable of satisfaction while also trying to shield itself against the rising working class.[2]

In contrast to figurational sociology's focus on power struggles, theories based on the concept of the *homo clausus* tend to emphasize the equality of individuals. Thus according to Charles Taylor, individualism and equality are at the core of modern nation-states. In an essay titled "Nationalism and Modernity," Taylor refers to "modern nation-states" as "'imagined communities' in Benedict Anderson's celebrated phrase." Taylor sees a "shift from hierarchical, mediated-access societies to horizontal, direct-access societies" (196). Consequently, he characterizes the relation of the individual to the nation-state from the perspective of the individual as follows: "My fundamental way of belonging to the state is not dependent on, or mediated by any of these other belongings. I stand alongside all my fellow citizens, in direct relationship to the state which is the object of our common allegiance" (196). Taylor further maintains that "these modes of imagined direct access are linked to, indeed are just different facets of, modern equality and individualism. Directness of access abolishes the heterogeneity of hierarchical belonging. It makes us uniform, and that is one way of becoming equal" (197). Anderson and Taylor then perceive the relation between the I of the individual and the we of the nation as one between a we-less individual who feels bound to the idea of the nation, a feeling that is thought to be independent of the individual's relation to other individuals. Furthermore, the bond to the nation connects the individual to all other national subjects as if they were all equal, disregarding social differences of class and race. "Finally," Anderson claims, a nation "is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (16). In contrast, Cas Wouters stresses the other side of the coin of fraternity, namely, a lack of value attributed to the life of an individual. Distinguishing between we-identity proper and an idealized we-identity that he calls "we-ideal," Wouters expounds: "Vehement nationalism usually indicates a strong we-ideal in combination with a contested and insecure we-identity, a combination that usually blocks a deeper sense of mortality, for in defence of both we-identity and we-ideals, I-ideals are subordinated, sacrificed, and the use of violence is accepted more easily. At the same time, the value of an individual human life is impeded from rising" (153–154). The interrelation Wouters postulates between the strength of the bond with which the individual is linked to the imagined community and the weakness of social cohesion among

the individuals in the respective nation differs from Anderson's model in that it considers both the dynamic nature of the figuration of the nation as well as its inherent power structure.

In *The Society of Individuals*, Elias points out that owing to "the complexity of humanity at its present stage of development" (202)—by which he means the development of modern societies since the Renaissance—the concept of the we-I balance has to be modified. It is no longer sufficient to consider just "one level or plane of integration in relation to which people can say 'we.'" Thus, in accordance with the "plurality of interlocking integration planes" characteristic of societies today, we have to bear in mind "this multi-layered aspect of we-concepts" (202). Such "we-relations" include people's families or friends, their hometowns, nation-states, and even mankind. Obviously "the intensity of identification varies with these different integration planes" (202), and while "involvement or commitment expressed by the use of the pronoun 'we' is probably usually strongest in relation to family," Elias thinks that "it is probably not an exaggeration to say that for most people mankind as a frame of reference for we-identity is a blank area on their emotional maps" (203). With regard to the increasing integration of humanity, Taylor seems to agree with Elias when he defines "modern individualism" as "imagining oneself as belonging to ever wider and more impersonal entities: the state, the movement, the community of mankind." And Taylor points out that "this is the same change—seen from another angle—that [can be] described . . . in terms borrowed from Craig Calhoun: the shift from 'network' or 'relational' identities to 'categorical' ones" (198).

In an article titled "Nationalism and Identity," Calhoun defines "ethnic groups" "in relation to the nation-state as subordinate internal and/or cross-cutting identities" (220). He quotes Max Weber's definition of an ethnic group as one whose members "entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration" (231). Obviously these factors are highly relevant aspects in the shaping of African American we-identities. Like Elias, Calhoun emphasizes the instability of collective identities with regard both to competing meanings of a particular ethnic identity and to the negotiations between ethnic and national identities: "Ethnic solidarities and identities are claimed most often where groups do not seek 'national' autonomy but rather recognition internal to or cross-cutting national or state boundaries. The possibility of a closer link to nationalism is seldom altogether absent from such ethnic claims, however, and the two sorts of categorical identities are often invoked

in similar ways" (235). One of the causes of the tensions between ethnic identity and national identity derives from the fact that "nationalism demands internal homogeneity" so that "nationalists commonly claim that national identities 'trump' other personal or group identities (such as gender, family, or ethnicity) and link individuals directly to the nation as a whole. This is sharply contrary to the way in which most ethnic identities flow from family membership, kinship, and membership in intermediate groups" (229). The reason why the we-feeling of ethnic identity changes very slowly has to do with the manner in which traditions are transmitted, namely, as Calhoun points out in reference to Pierre Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice* (1990), not by the mere passing on of contents but by the reproduction of "a 'habitus' or orientation to social action" (222).

Like Elias, Calhoun criticizes the notion of a "self-contained individual" because this concept of the self has "made it common to understand social groupings as sets of equivalent persons . . . rather than webs of relationships among persons or hierarchies of positions" (230). Such a neglect of the continuous and inevitable interweaving of individual beings leads to an overemphasis on equality that does not do justice to the situation of minorities.

The Instability of the African American We-Identity

Since the founding of the American nation, African Americans have been exposed to strategies of exclusion that according to Wouters are correlative to the strength of the national we-ideal and the corresponding insecurity of the we-identity. The fact that African Americans were considered outsiders necessarily shaped their own we-group identities and we-ideals. Given their marginality, what kinds of communities did they imagine, and how were they negotiated? Under what conditions were African Americans susceptible to the notion of the nation as imagined community despite their continuous experience of exploitation and exclusion? Not surprisingly, African Americans often expressed an ambivalence toward the American nation. In reaction to the history of slavery and segregation, they developed two complementary strategies of resistance: integrationism and nationalism. Moreover, their attitudes were prone to shift depending on the willingness or unwillingness of whites to integrate the outsiders into the "fraternity" of the nation.[3] In a statement on black nationalism, Cornel West stresses the interdependence of nationalism and ostracism: "Any kind of nationalism, for the most part, will be used in a way that ends up dehumanizing folks. We all need recognition and some

form of protection, but usually in these dominant forms the quest for group unity results in attacking someone else" (525). Asked whether he felt he could be an integral part of American society, West expressed an ambivalence not untypical of black intellectuals and referred explicitly to W. E. B. Du Bois's famous notion of "double consciousness," responding: "Yes and no. After 244 years of slavery and 87 years of Jim Crow, I think black people in America will always have some sense of being outsiders. Yet there's a sense in which I am part of it, because the nation is unimaginable without black people in the culture, either past or present. It's the tension between being an outsider and being more integral to America than 90 percent of Americans. It's what Du Bois called 'double consciousness.' I'm thirteenth-generation American! That's about as integral as you can get" (525).

While the locus classicus of Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" is, of course, his early essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk*, he further elaborated on the notion of the "twoness of the black American" in his essay "The Conservation of Races": "What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates black and white America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American?" (5). In this passage Du Bois poses the question as a theoretical one, as if the choice between the national and the ethnic identity could be resolved once and for all. In practice, however, concepts of integrationism and black nationalism often competed with each other, not only in the form of various programmatic movements but also in the shifting attitudes of African American intellectuals and activists. As mentioned before, more often than not, these changing positions depended on the degree of inclusion in, or respectively exclusion from, the national community imagined by whites. Figurational sociology turns this experience into the following theoretical statement: "It is a general principle that one group's '*we-image*' is defined in large measure in relation to its '*they-image*' of another group or groups" (Mennell 19).

What is important to realize—and what is usually not discussed in non-figurational theories—is the fact that the relation between "we-image" and "they-image" is not neutral but depends on power imbalances between the established and the outsiders. Not surprisingly, then, African Americans tend to express an awareness of the structural inequality that is at the basis of the relationship between blacks and whites. In a study

that looks at imagined black communities from the perspective of African American thinkers, Richard Johnson addresses "the pernicious dilemma" by pointing out that "African-Americans yearn for an imagined community that is *yet to be* while existing as subaltern[s] in actual communities that privilege majority normativity. . . . I argue that this is a form of conceptual political violence" (19).[4]

In the discussion that follows, I trace major manifestations of skepticism toward belonging to the national community as well as affirmations of belonging to other imagined communities in the writings of two seminal black intellectuals and activists of the past, Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois. Not only are they considered the most prominent black intellectuals of their time, but also they are both examples of activists who—unlike black leaders who strove for a separate black nation—were willing to probe various measures of integrationism. For this reason their struggles with alternative we-identities are more complex than those of radical nationalists who have given up on the United States as a homeland for African Americans. The relation of the African American we-I balance is often negotiated in autobiographies, since in the case of black subjects the act of evoking the individual past necessarily involves grappling with the collective history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation and the effects that white supremacy have had on the we-identity of African Americans. Consequently, more often than not, African American writers interweave the narrative of their life story with reflections on the social situation of the African American people. While Douglass included some of his speeches in his two autobiographies, Du Bois, in *Dusk of Dawn*, intended to interrelate the development of his own intellectual and political strivings with the events of global history and their consequences for himself and "many millions, who with me have had their lives shaped and directed by this course of events" (3). The centrality of the interweaving of individual and collective experience to Du Bois's book already becomes obvious from its subtitle: *An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept.*

"Wounded in the House of His Friends": Frederick Douglass's Negotiations of African American We-Identities

In the case of Frederick Douglass, his changing position as to the relation between the "we" of the nation-state and the "we" of the ethnic community of the Negro has been a contested issue among critics. I cannot possibly do justice to this long-standing and complex debate. For the

purposes of this essay it may suffice to discuss a few examples of his shifting ideas of African American we-identities. The classic expression of the exclusion of African Americans from the American nation is Douglass's famous 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" an extract of which he included in his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855. In this speech Douglass articulates in unequivocal terms the sense of exclusion vis-à-vis the imagined community of the nation-state. He rhetorically asks, "What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?" (*Autobiographies* 431). He assures his "fellow-citizens" that he would gladly join them in the celebration; "but," he adds, "with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! . . . The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. . . . This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*" (431). And in the final passage of his speech, he attacks the false we-ideal of Americans in a most powerful sequence of reproaches: "To him [the slave], your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery, your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages" (434).[5]

This speech, rich in implications about vital political and moral issues such as the United States Constitution, the framers' "original intent," and natural law doctrine, has been widely examined.[6] Within the context of African American we-identities, it is relevant because of the rhetorical devices Douglass employs to stress the crucial difference between the national—that is, "white"—view of the celebration of liberty and the slave's outsider position. He makes extensive use of the juxtaposition of personal and possessive pronouns, and he shifts the meaning of "we," sometimes identifying with the citizens of the nation, sometimes distancing himself from his "fellow citizens" as well as from the slave by referring to the latter in the third-person singular.[7]

In a lecture on the antislavery movement Douglass gave in 1855, he sets his hope on a we-group that transcends the nation: the abolitionist movement. In enumerating its allies, Douglass claims that "in addition to authors, poets, and scholars at home, the moral sense of the civilized world is with us" (450), and he refers to England, France, and Germany

as "the three great lights of modern civilization" that support the cause. "But," he points out, "there is a deeper and truer method of measuring the power of our cause, and of comprehending its vitality. This is to be found in its accordance with the best elements of human nature. . . . The slave is bound to mankind by the powerful and inextricable net-work of human brotherhood" (449). It is interesting to note that in transgressing the national toward the international and from there even moving toward the most comprehensive level of integration, namely, humankind, Douglass phrases his appeal to universalism in terms of an imagined community, or as he calls it, the "net-work of human brotherhood."

After Emancipation, Douglass develops the concept of what in his well-known speech of 1869 he calls "Our Composite Nationality."[8] Here he expresses his hope that the United States will come up to its mission and mold the various races and ethnicities represented in its population into Americans in order to become "the perfect national illustration of the unity and dignity of the human family that the world has ever seen" (*Papers* 253). Again, Douglass conceptualizes what according to Calhoun is a "categorical identity," as if it were a network identity analogous to the family. As Robert S. Levine argues in his informative study *Dislocating Race and Nation*, Douglass insisted that his support of the Santo Domingo annexation plan differed from American imperialism: "For Douglass, Santo Domingo annexation was about a hemispheric nationalism in which various peoples of the Americas recognize their common aspirations and shared humanity. . . . Douglass thus invokes the cosmopolitanism that throughout his career would have such a pronounced impact on his views of race and nation, appealing to 'that side which allies man to the Infinite, which in some sense leads him to view the broad world as his country and all mankind as his countrymen'" (217).[9]

As naïve and bizarre as Douglass's position may appear to us, given the political context of imperialism (see Levine 218), his attempt to forge an imagined community by cross-cutting national boundaries while at the same time extending the U.S. black imagined community is a significant step in Douglass's various efforts to shape new we-identities that would ultimately lead to a genuinely cosmopolitan American community. Moreover, the example highlights the importance of print media in the development of the imagined community of the nation. After all, it is "the novel and the newspaper" that "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 30). At the time Douglass became involved in the Santo Domingo annexation plan, he was also the publisher and editor of the

African American newspaper the *New National Era*. In the first issue under his editorship, Douglass justified the renaming of the newspaper, formerly known as the *New Era*, by "stating that it now aspires to be a 'national journal in its truest and broadest sense'" (Levine 205). True to his "nationalist" agenda, Douglass politicizes the newspaper by shifting its focus from literary contributions to the questions of nation and race (see Levine chap. 4).

Nevertheless, Douglass's vision of the complete assimilation of race within a we-ideal of a cosmopolitan nation would fade whenever he was confronted with versions of the imagined national community of his white fellow citizens that depended on the ostracizing of African Americans. The *Dred Scott* decision was one of these moments to which Douglass reacted by contemplating emigration to the black republic of Haiti. Yet Douglass saw the "most flagrant example of . . . national deterioration" in the 1883 decision of the United States Supreme Court that declared unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which had been intended to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment. He devotes a whole chapter to the discussion of the Supreme Court ruling in his autobiography, *Life and Times*, in which he sharply accuses the Court of being "wholly under the influence of the slave power" and "placing itself on the side of prejudice, proscription, and persecution" (*Autobiographies* 966). In his depiction of the reaction of blacks to this decision, Douglass uses the image of the American nation as a house with a twist, for in this house African Americans live as guests whose hosts have violated the universal law of hospitality by failing to protect them: "The colored citizen . . . was wounded in the house of his friends. He felt that this decision drove him from the doors of the great temple of American justice. The nation that he had served against its enemies had thus turned him over naked to those enemies" (987). In contrast to the integrationist vision of a nation that would merge all its various peoples into a perfect union which Douglass fostered in the promising early years of Reconstruction, the image of the betrayed black citizen conveys a reservation vis-à-vis the possibility of full integration. And yet, rather than giving up the concept of integration altogether, Douglass reveals a deep ambivalence, which again is significantly expressed in the changing meaning of the pronoun "we." The greater part of the chapter consists of the speech Douglass gave in protest to the Supreme Court decision at Lincoln Hall in Washington, D.C. In this speech he had used the metaphor of the house of friends with a slight variation: "We have been, as a class, grievously wounded, wounded in the house of our friends, and this wound is too deep and too

painful for ordinary and measured speech" (968). In this sentence the personal pronoun "we" refers to the group of black citizens with whom the speaker identifies, while in a later passage of the speech Douglass changes the meaning of "we" to signify "we, the nation." Appealing to his "fellow-citizens," Douglass speaks for the whole nation: "We want no black Ireland in America. We want no aggrieved class in America. Strong as we are without the negro, we are stronger with him than without him. The power and friendship of seven millions of people, however scattered all over the country, are not to be despised" (973–974). By shifting the meaning of "we," Douglass stresses the fact that there is more than a single we-identity, and he emphasizes the perspective of the marginalized ethnic group that does not necessarily identify with the imagined community of the nation.

The World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, a spectacular moment in American history, when the nation staged itself as an idealized community and the epitome of civilization, caused Douglass to reflect on a missed opportunity. As he put it in his last great speech, "Why Is the Negro Lynched?" (1892): "As nowhere in the world, it was hoped that here the idea of human brotherhood would have been grandly recognized and most gloriously illustrated. It should have been thus, had it been what it professed to be, a World's Exposition. It was not such, however, in its spirit at this point; it was only an American Exposition. The spirit of American caste against the educated Negro was conspicuously seen from start to finish" (*Speeches* 763). Indeed, African Americans were systematically excluded from all U.S. exhibits, and it was only due to the president of Haiti, who invited Douglass to represent Haiti at the World's Columbian Exposition, that African Americans became part of the exhibition. Douglass turned the Haitian pavilion into a meeting place of African American intellectuals. In sharp protest to the politics of the government, Douglass claimed: "The negro exclusion . . . says to the world that the colored people of America are not deemed by Americans within the compass of American law, progress and civilization. It says to the lynchers and mobocrats of the South, go on in your hellish work of Negro persecution. You kill their bodies, we kill their souls" (764).

In this address Douglass demonstrates once more his deep understanding of structural power imbalances. In fact he seems to be fully aware of a decisive mechanism of established-outsider relations, which allows the group of the established to feel superior. At the core of the claim of superiority is the interrelation of group charisma and complementary group disgrace, as theorized by Elias in *The Established and the Outsiders*

(1965): "One can observe again and again that members of groups which are, in terms of *power*, stronger than other interdependent groups, think of themselves in human terms as *better* than the others" (1).[10] More specifically, Elias emphasizes the structural regularity of established-outsider relations: "An established group tends to attribute to its outsider group as a whole the 'bad' characteristics of that group's 'worst' section—of its anomic minority. In contrast, the self-image of the established group tends to be modelled on its exemplary, most 'nomic' or norm-setting section, on the minority of its 'best' members. This *pars pro toto* distortion in opposite directions enables an established group to prove their point to themselves as well as to others" (5).

Douglass clearly recognizes the principle underlying the injustice and cruelty of the social ritual of lynching, namely, the identification of black individuals with the outsiders' "worst" section: "When a white man steals, robs or murders, his crime is visited upon his own head alone. But not so with the black man. When he commits a crime, the whole race is made responsible. The case before us [lynching in the South] is an example" (*Speeches* 763). Douglass also realizes that the "*pars pro toto* distortion in opposite directions" is enforced by representations of the two groups in visual art: "Even when American art undertakes to picture the types of the two races, it invariably places in comparison, not the best of both races as common fairness would dictate, but it puts side by side and in glaring contrast, the lowest type of the Negro with the highest type of the white man and then calls upon the world to 'look upon this picture, then upon that'" (763). As Elias points out, "there is always some evidence to show that one's group is 'good' and the other is 'bad'" (5).

Elias insisted on a figurative conception of "prejudices," according to which they have to be understood as a result of the sociodynamics of stigmatization deriving from group processes: "Thus one misses the key to the problem usually discussed under headings such as 'social prejudice,' if one looks for it solely in the personality structure of individual people. One can find it only if one considers the figuration formed by the two (or more) groups concerned or, in other words, the nature of their interdependence. The centrepiece of that figuration is an uneven balance of power and the tensions inherent in it. . . . Unmitigated contempt and one-sided stigmatisation of outsiders without redress . . . signal a very uneven balance of power. Attaching the label of 'lower human value' to another group is one of the weapons used in a power struggle by superior groups as a means of maintaining their social superiority" (6).

The high level of American status insecurity "as a function of both

class and nationality" (Wouters) enhances the anxiety of "social contamination," that is, the fear of losing one's we- and I-identity by close contact with members of the group of outsiders (Wouters 43). As long as this basic social fear remains widespread among the established, a more even balance of power is unlikely to emerge. As the insecurity of their own we- and I-identity grows, whites display a tendency to increase physical and symbolic violence toward blacks. This creates a mounting distance among African Americans toward the imagined community of the nation. Consequently, even Douglass, who in general favors an integrationist model of American society, is forced repeatedly to distance himself from the national layer of we-identity and to resume the rhetoric of resistance. Rather than replacing the national we-identity with the we-identity of a separate black community, however, he resorts to the transnational level and the ideals of universalism. By evoking the idea of human brotherhood, he admonishes the American nation to fulfill the promises of its own Constitution.

"Looking Out from a Dark Cave": W. E. B. Du Bois's Struggle against Provincialism

Like Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois was aware of "the pattern of group charisma and complementary group disgrace" in established-outsider relations. In *Dusk of Dawn* he states: "The Negro group is spoken of continually as one undifferentiated low-class mass. The culture of the higher whites is often considered as typical of all the whites" (93). In his case, the insight into this mechanism that helps sustain power imbalances between whites and blacks is not surprising. After all, he was one of the earliest representatives of the discipline of sociology. He had heard Max Weber in Berlin and later corresponded with him on his sociological investigation *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). About his studies at Harvard Du Bois writes: "It was at Harvard that my education, turning from philosophy, centered in history and then gradually in economics and social problems. Today [1940] my course of study would have been called sociology; but in that day Harvard did not recognize any such science" (*Dusk* 20).

Du Bois thought that his life had "deep significance [only] because it was a part of a problem," and thus in his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* he set out to analyze the "race problem . . . in the terms of the one human life I know best" (xxx–xxxi). In taking a sociological perspective on his own life, he focuses on the nation's division along the color line, linking the internal segregation of, discrimination against, and exploitation

of the Negro to the oppression of colored peoples of the world. In fact, in the very first paragraph of *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois establishes the connection between national and global history as it evolved over the seven decades of his life: "From 1868 to 1940 stretch seventy-two mighty years, which are incidentally the years of my own life but more especially years of cosmic significance, when one remembers that they rush from the American Civil War to the reign of the second Roosevelt; from Victoria to the sixth George; from the Franco-Prussian to the two World Wars. They contain the rise and fall of the Hohenzollerns, the shadowy emergence, magnificence and miracle of Russia; the turmoil of Asia in China, India and Japan, and the world-wide domination of white Europe" (1).

Yet writing about his early upbringing, he also emphasizes the local and regional. Raised in Great Barrington, a small town in western Massachusetts, Du Bois "in general thought and conduct" became "quite thoroughly New England" (9)—so much so, he writes, that "the Negroes in the South, when I came to know them, could never understand why I did not naturally greet everyone I passed on the street or slap my friends on the back" (9). He also stresses his early indebtedness to the Protestant work ethic: "My general attitude toward property and income was that all who were willing to work could easily earn a living; that those who had property had earned it and deserved it and could use it as they wished; that poverty was the shadow of crime and connoted lack of thrift and shiftlessness. These were the current patterns of economic thought of the town of my boyhood" (9). He thinks that there was but one consideration that saved him "from complete conformity with the thoughts and confusions of then current social trends; and that was the problems of racial and cultural contacts" (13). And yet in the beginning he was still caught in a parochial point of view, he writes, limiting "the struggle for which I was preparing . . . primarily to the plight of the comparatively small group of American Negroes with which I was identified, and theoretically to the larger Negro race. I did not face the general plight and conditions of all humankind" (13). During the three years Du Bois spent studying at Fisk University, his awareness of the color line deepened. For the fist time in his life he was confronted, he recalls, "with a sort of violence that I had never realized in New England" (15). It was in reaction to his experiences of more violent forms of discrimination and racial segregation that he started his career as a public speaker. For his graduation speech, Du Bois chose a topic related to nation-building, namely, Bismarck: "Bismarck was my hero. He had made a nation out of a mass of bickering peoples. He had dominated the whole development with his

strength until he crowned an emperor at Versailles. This foreshadowed in my mind the kind of thing that American Negroes must do, marching forth with strength and determination under trained leadership" (16). Looking back, Du Bois is very critical of his choice which "showed the abyss between my education and the truth in the world" (16), and he calls himself "blithely European and imperialist in outlook; democratic as democracy was conceived in America" (17). It is only later, when he studied at the University of Berlin (1892–1894), that he "began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the development of Europe as one" (23–24).[11]

What, then, is Du Bois's we-identity? The tensions in his loyalties are obvious. Having absorbed New England cultural patterns and speech, he writes, "my African racial feeling was then purely a matter of my own later learning and reaction. . . . But it was none the less real and a large determinant of my life and character. I felt myself African by 'race' and by that token was African and an integral member of the group of dark Americans who were called Negroes. At the same time I was firm in asserting that these Negroes were Americans" (58). Referring to his own family history, he produces excellent anecdotal evidence of the fragile status of his group's membership in the imagined community of the nation: "On the basis of my great-great-grandfather's Revolutionary record I was accepted as a member of the Massachusetts Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, in 1908. When, however, the notice of this election reached the headquarters in Washington and was emphasized by my requesting a national certificate, the secretary, A. Howard Clark of the Smithsonian Institution, wrote to Massachusetts and demanded 'proof of marriage of the ancestor of Tom Burghardt and record of birth of the son.' He knew, of course, that the birth record of a stolen African slave could not possibly be produced. My membership was, therefore, suspended" (58).

As to his ethnic identity, Du Bois agrees with Weber's definition by claiming: "The badge of color [was] relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa" (59). His transnational, global perspective is based, then, on the we-identity of African Americans forged both from the knowledge of the heritage of bondage and from the experience of the continuing consequences of slavery. In a fictional conversation about race between a persona of Du Bois's and a white

supremacist, Roger Van Dieman, the latter reacts in bewilderment to Du Bois's statement that race "is a cultural, sometimes an historical fact," and finally asks:

> "But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it 'black' when you admit it is not black?"
>
> "I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride 'Jim Crow' in Georgia." (77)

Less often discussed than the metaphor of the veil and the concept of double consciousness is Du Bois's much darker image of the "full psychological meaning of caste segregation" that he paints in *Dusk of Dawn:* "It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it" (66). He imagines himself as someone who tries to explain to the outer world "how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development." But those who pass by do not take notice of the prisoners. Owing to "some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass . . . between them and the world," communication fails. Du Bois stresses the growing despair of the prisoners when they realize that the outer world does not hear them even when they start screaming and tends to react in amusement at their frantic gesticulations. And when "here and there" the prisoners manage to "break through in blood and disfigurement," they are confronted by "a horrified . . . mob of people frightened for their own very existence" (66). This "group imprisonment" in a cave, while resonant of Plato's allegory of the cave, is all the more dismal for deconstructing Platonic idealism. Furthermore, in contrast to the image of the veil, the metaphor of the "wall of glass" (66) stresses the pain and the suffering of the victimized outsiders and both the indifference of the established and the fear that erupts when the glass wall is broken by violence and they feel threatened. Apart from the emotional tribute paid by both groups, Du Bois emphasizes the negative effects that the "group imprisonment within a group" (67) has on the prisoner. Focusing exclusively on the problems of his own group, the prisoner becomes provincial and "tends to neglect the wider aspects of national life and human existence" (67). This leads on the one hand to an almost unlimited loyalty to his group and on the other hand to a deeply ingrained resentment, if not hatred, toward the white world, which in turn enhances the difficulties of communication between the two "castes" (66). According to Du Bois, then, the we-identity of the Negro trumps his we-identity as an American, not for reasons inherent in race or cultural tradition, however, but rather

in reaction to the we-ideal of Americans that does not allow for the inclusion of the "uncivilized" Negro in the fraternity of the nation.

Although Du Bois calls this parable "the race concept which has dominated my life" (67), it should not be misunderstood as a static model. The social scientist Du Bois himself adds this methodological caveat: "Perhaps it is wrong to speak of it as a 'concept' rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies" (67). With regard to Du Bois's individual we-identity, it is not a fixed position either. First, as an African American intellectual and activist, he sees himself in the difficult position of an interpreter and mediator whose fundamental limitations he candidly discloses. Although he can communicate with his fellows from the position outside the glass wall and is able to "assume a facile championship of the entombed, and gain the enthusiastic and even gushing thanks of the victims" (66), this "outside leadership," as Du Bois calls it, will always be in danger of misinterpreting experiences and feelings not shared. More important, "the outside advocacy . . . remains impotent and unsuccessful until it actually succeeds in freeing and making articulate the submerged caste" (67). Second, the same pattern that is typical of Douglass reoccurs in Du Bois, namely, a shifting between the we-identities of "Negro" and "American." For example, Du Bois recalls during World War I becoming "nearer to feeling myself a real and full American than ever before or since" (128).[12] And in 1919 Du Bois experienced the conflict of his feelings of national pride and disillusionment. He had planned "a national Negro celebration of the Tercentenary" in memory of the landing of a group of twenty Africans in Virginia, in August 1619. But "alas, almost exactly three hundred years later there occurred race riots in Chicago and Washington which were among the worst in their significance that the Negro had encountered during his three hundred years of slavery and emancipation" (131–132). In addition to the economic reasons (above all, growing competition between black and white workers due to the migration of southern blacks to the northern industrial cities) that triggered hostilities against African Americans, which in turn caused the riots, there were increasing incidents of lynching. A considerable number of victims were black soldiers, and, according to Du Bois, the resentment behind the violence was based on "the recognition and kudos which Negroes received in the World War; and particularly their treatment in France" (132).

The tension between inclusion and exclusion as described by Du Bois in *Dusk of Dawn* is, of course, not limited to his experiences in the postwar era, nor is it restricted to his autobiographical narratives. What

Glenda Carpio convincingly suggests with regard to Du Bois's book *The Gift of Black Folk* is true of his grappling with the "problem of the color line" throughout his life, namely, that he "walks a tightrope between a patriotic embrace of an America in which African American culture has become an inextricable part and an exhortation of the rebellion and struggle out of which that culture arose" (xxiii).

After World War I, Du Bois pursued three complementary strategies to improve the situation of African Americans, one cultural, one political, and one economic. The first "represented an old ideal and ambition, the development of literature and art among Negroes"; the second consisted of the further development of the Pan-African movement; and the third was about "the economic rehabilitation and defense of the American Negro" (*Dusk* 134). Du Bois considered the third the most fundamental. It was about the establishment of cooperative forms of the economy. Not only did Du Bois question capitalism, but also he tried to devise new organizations, such as the Negro Co-operative Guild. Interestingly, the "Citizens Co-operative stores" were quite successful, and so was a program of teaching basic theories of co-operation at a black state school in West Virginia—until it was outlawed by the state (*Dusk* 140).

Inspired by a socialist view of the forces of global capitalism, Du Bois came to understand the interrelation between the exploitation of the peoples of Africa and Asia by Europe and the United States and the "expulsion of black men from American democracy, their subjection to caste control and wage slavery" (*Dusk* 48). He himself had overcome what he considered the provincial outlook derived from fostering the narrow racial we-identity of the black community, shaped by the glass wall of segregation. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out in the series introduction to the Oxford edition of Du Bois, the image Du Bois creates for the community that transcends national boundaries in *Worlds of Color* (1961)—book 3 of the Black Flame trilogy—is "the world as one unified dwelling place" (Gates xix).[13]

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As I hope I have shown, the conflicts and tensions between the ethnic we-identity and the national we-identity can be severe in outsider groups. They suffer from the physical or symbolic violence exerted by the group of the established in reaction to the weakness of their own we-identity. Because of long-standing experiences of exclusion and suppression—or in Du Bois's harsh words, the "imprisonment of a human group with chains in hands of an environing group" (*Dusk* 69)—African Americans

usually forge a strong we-identity with their ethnic group, which is constructed as a relational group identity whose members are considered extended family, that is, "brothers and sisters." At the same time, the concept of race suggests a reaching out beyond the imagined community of the nation by identifying instead with international or global communities. Douglass, who was very much influenced by the tradition of the Enlightenment, took resort in the universalistic network of brotherhood and, temporarily, in "hemispheric nationalism." Du Bois favored the Pan-African movement and the international movement of socialism. Although these types of group identities may be defined as categorical, both thinkers succeeded in investing them with great fervor, that is, with considerable we-feelings, which in turn strengthened their commitment. Thus in contrast to the general long-term development of the we-I balance tilting toward the I-identity, the we-I balance of African Americans seems to have maintained a relatively strong we-identity component. According to figurational sociology, this could change only with a weakening of the we-ideal of the established (see Wouters 154). A weakening of nationalism could result from the ongoing processes toward an increasing social integration of mankind. As Elias pointed out, the majority of human beings are emotionally not yet ready to identify with the we-identity of mankind (*Society* 203). But as the example of African Americans has shown, the willingness to identify with the "network of human brotherhood" is dependent on the violence exerted on social groups. Rather than falling back to lower levels of integration, such as the family or the clan, political parties, or religious groups, they may choose to reach out for the solidarity of human beings on the highest level of integration.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the reception of Elias's figurational and Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology in the United States and a brief survey of similarities between the theories and concepts of the two sociologists, see Buschendorf, Franke, and Voelz 1–7; for further impediments to the reception of Elias in the United States, see Mennell; for an assessment of the historical and systematical obstacles to the American reception of Bourdieu's relational sociology, see Wacquant; see also Susen and Turner. Until recently, sociologists have disregarded the conceptual similarities between Elias and Bourdieu; see Paulle, van Heerikhuzen, and Emirbayer.

2. While it is universally known that Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital are based on the assumption that power struggles are an integral part of human

societies, the importance of his concept of "symbolic violence" as an essential tool of analyzing the "gentle and often invisible violence" (Bourdieu 35) has only fairly recently been recognized.

3. Cf. James H. Cone on the interrelatedness of both traditions in the section titles "Integrationism and Nationalism in African-American Intellectual History" in his introduction to *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 3–17. Cone argues: "The ebb and flow of black nationalism, during the nineteenth century and thereafter, was influenced by the decline and rise of black expectations of equality in the United States. When blacks felt that the achievement of equality was impossible, the nationalist sentiment among them always increased" (11).

4. Johnson explicitly draws on Anderson's term "imagined communities," but "with the stipulation that [in contrast to the nineteenth century] there are no government authorities currently using media to promote positive visions of African-American community" (2). Johnson probes African American visions appropriate for a post-nationalistic age. He analyzes concepts of Black Nationalism as well as Martin Luther King Jr.'s ideal of the "beloved community" and then investigates the postmodern black condition from the point of view of Cornel West and Lucius Outlaw.

5. Cf. this passage from Douglass's autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in which he quotes from one of a series of letters written to William Lloyd Garrison during his stay in Great Britain on January 1, 1846: "As to nation, I belong to none. . . . I am an outcast from the society of my childhood, and an outlaw in the land of my birth. . . . That men should be patriotic, is to me perfectly natural; and as a philosophical fact, I am able to give it an *intellectual* recognition. But no further can I go. If ever I had any patriotism, or any capacity for the feeling, it was whipped out of me long since, by the lash of the American soul-drivers" (*Autobiographies* 372).

6. Cf. Colaiaco's monograph on Douglass's speech, which also discusses earlier debates.

7. Cf. Elias's observations on the interconnectedness of personal pronouns reflecting the correlation between macro- and micro-sociological investigations in his essay "The Personal Pronouns as a Figurational Model," in *What Is Sociology?* 122–127.

8. Douglass, "Our Composite Nationality: An Address Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts, on 7 December 1869," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 240–259.

9. Levine refers here to a stump speech, "Santo Domingo," that Douglass would give between 1871 and 1873; he quotes from a version of the speech Douglass presented in St. Louis in January 1873, which was reprinted in the *New National Era* in January 1873.

10. *The Established and the Outsiders* is based on extensive fieldwork undertaken near Leicester, England, in the course of which Elias and John Scotson discovered that this statistically homogeneous community, whose population did not differ with regard to nationality, ethnicity, class, education, or religion,

displayed a sharp dividing line between an old-established group who had lived in Winston Parva (the fictive name for South Wigston) for about three generations and a group of residents who had only recently moved to a newly developed site. The longer duration of residence correlating with a high degree of group cohesion was sufficient to exclude the newcomers from the older residents' social networks and important positions. In short, the study revealed an unexpected power differential and, as a consequence, a certain pattern of group behavior that Elias theorized as the established-outsider relationship.

11. In the light of today's emphasis on interdisciplinarity, it is interesting to note that Du Bois, by studying a discipline called "Staatswissenschaften" under the renowned Professor Gustav Schmoller, was introduced to genuinely interdisciplinary research based on statistics, economics, (economic) history, and sociology, an approach that was highly influential on his own work; see Wortham 3.

12. Cf. Du Bois's later emphasis on patriotism: "I felt for a moment as the war progressed that I could be without reservation a patriotic American" (*Autobiography* 274). Yet Du Bois expresses deep skepticism at the type of fervent patriotism he—with scathing sarcasm—ascribes to a white friend: "We must put patriotism before everything—make 'em salute the flag, stop radical treason, keep out the dirty foreigners, disfranchise niggers and make America a Power!" (*Dusk* 84).

13. Cf. the similar image Martin Luther King Jr. proposed in his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here?* He writes: "However deeply American Negroes are caught in the struggle to be at last at home in our homeland of the United States, we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers. Equality with whites will not solve the problems of either whites or Negroes if it means equality in a world society stricken by poverty and in a universe doomed to extinction by war" (177).

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