

## Double Consciousness in Black America

by John H. McWhorter

In *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, W. E. B. DuBois famously described black Americans as possessing what he called a double consciousness, caught between a self-conception as an American and as a person of African descent. As DuBois put it, “The Negro ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings . . . two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

As they so often do, DuBois’s teachings apply as well to black Americans over a century later. In that vein, the double consciousness he referred to is often claimed to describe modern black Americans, but with an implication that this is because of whites’ resistance to blacks’ true inclusion in the American fabric.

But analysts who make such claims resist acknowledging that race relations in America have undergone seismic changes since 1903. DuBois’s conception remains relevant, but only in a reflex evolved from the one that he described.

Black America today is permeated by a new double consciousness. A tacit sense reigns among a great many black Americans today that the “authentic” black person stresses personal initiative and strength in private but dutifully takes on the mantle of victimhood in public.

For many people, the private orienta-

*John H. McWhorter is an associate professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, and the author of several books, including Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority and The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language. He delivered these remarks at a Cato seminar in New York City on November 15, 2002.*



Rep. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) and Senator-elect John Sununu (R-N.H.) discuss the role of Social Security in the 2002 election at a Cato Hill Briefing on December 4. Both stressed that their advocacy of private accounts had helped their campaigns. See page 8.

tion toward personal empowerment will sound unfamiliar—naturally, because most of us experience black discourse only from the outside and hear a discourse in which victimhood is enshrined at all costs. Thus in the last presidential election, all but a sliver of blacks voted for the presidential candidate committed to treating blacks as victims. When Harvard’s president, Lawrence Summers, asked Cornel West why he had not written an academic book in 10 years, West called him “the Ariel Sharon of higher education” and left the school for Princeton, claiming that the Harvard establishment was afraid that “the Negroes are taking over.” When Michael Jackson’s fading popularity depresses sales of his new recordings, he calls his producer racist. And so on.

But that is only one part of the true story about black Americans in our moment. Many of these high-profile events are really more a kind of theatre than anything else.

*Continued on page 14*

### In This Issue



Freedom in Hong Kong, p. 7

Niskanen on divided government	2
Cato Handbook for Congress	3
Sununu and Toomey: Social Security in the 2002 elections	8
The futile war on drugs in Latin America	11
Social Security reform in Europe	12
Free enterprise in space	16
Cato Journal: taxes, inflation, and unemployment	17
Regulation: four views on smoking and government	17
Cato files amicus briefs	18

## “The recent movie hit *Barbershop* was full of ordinary characters making casual observations right out of Shelby Steele.”

### BLACK AMERICA *Continued from page 1*

We gain a different perspective on what's really happening in the black community from polls taken over the past 10 years. The *New York Times* has done polls of roughly a thousand blacks from around the country. In the year 2000, a mere 7 percent of blacks thought racism was the most important problem for the next generation of Americans to solve. In 1990, 33 percent of blacks thought race relations in America were generally good; in 2000, 51 percent did. In 1992, 29 percent of blacks thought progress had been made in race relations since the 1960s; by 2000, 58 percent did.

#### Black Conservatives at the Barbershop

Results like those square easily with a black person's ordinary experience. All of the positions commonly deemed “black conservative” are easy topics at a black barbecue today. Bring these things up and you are almost sure to have at least half the room agreeing and the two or three professional victimologists among the group going away feeling on the defensive. The recent movie hit *Barbershop* nicely captured this. Aside from the very brief knocks on Jesse Jackson and Martin Luther King that attracted so much attention, the film was full of ordinary characters making casual observations right out of Shelby Steele. At the Manhattan Institute, Steve Malanga told me that when he saw it, he kept wondering whether I had written it, and I must admit that when I saw it, I often found myself thinking the same thing.

The problem is that when asked about race issues in the presence of whites the next day, the same people who sounded a lot like Thomas Sowell the night before often pause for a moment and then carefully dredge up episodes of possible racism they may have encountered in their lives, claim that there aren't enough positive images of blacks in the media, and the like.

In the black community today, there is a tacit rule that black responsibility and self-empowerment are not to be discussed where whites can hear.

Why is it that so many blacks are uncomfortable acknowledging the successes of the race in public, beyond athletics and entertainment? To the outside observer, nothing could look more counterproductive. But it's based on a certain internal logic, a guiding notion—so deeply entrenched in modern black thought that it is rarely declared explicitly—that until all racism is extinct in the United States, any black success is mere luck, and meanwhile most of black America remains decisively hobbled, unable to do more than show up.

Another conviction follows from this: that the ills of black America can be undone only by whites, rather than by blacks themselves. Untold numbers of oppressed groups worldwide have risen to the top through their own efforts, amidst discrimination much more concrete than any that most blacks Americans encounter today. But in everyday life, this is a rather arcane point, and it gets lost in a consensus that black Americans' experience is somehow unique in this regard. Black people roughly 60 and younger have spent their mature lives in a climate where it is assumed that black uplift means “not letting whites off the hook.” This phrase is heard so often among blacks today that it is nothing less than a mantra, spiritually resonant and virtually unquestioned.

Any author who claims he never reads his Amazon reviews is being coy, I suspect, and to illustrate what I mean, I'd like to quote one from a black reader of my book *Losing the Race*.

I'm hesitant to write this review. On the one hand, I absolutely loved the book, despite having started it hating McWhorter from what I had heard about him. As I read it, I found it harder and harder to disagree with him. However, I'm worried that McWhorter's argumentation will be picked up by truly anti-black people. . . . I'm troubled by the fact that white people who already harbor prejudices against African Americans now have yet another weapon.

Polls give other indications that black Americans today tend to assume that resid-

ual racism is a decisive obstacle rather than an inconvenience. In a 1991 Gallup Poll, almost half of the blacks polled thought that three of four blacks lived in the inner city. One even sees black American scholars laboring under this misimpression: in 1998, Manning Marable's depiction of black America in the *New York Times* was that “a segment of the minority population moves into the corporate and political establishment at the same time that most are pushed even further down the economic ladder.” Marable is the head of Columbia's African American Studies Department. Poll after poll shows that blacks tend to assume that even if conditions for themselves and their immediate communities are good, they are much less so for most other blacks. In the *New York Times* poll of 2000, 72 percent of blacks thought race relations were good in their communities, but only 57 percent thought they were good in America.

#### The New Double Consciousness

Where does this new double consciousness come from? It is vital to understand that, at heart, it is a symptom of a deep pain among black Americans. The Civil Rights Act freed blacks from legalized segregation, but once freed, blacks met a new intellectual and cultural climate that taught that the Establishment was an agent of repression and that its norms must be suspect to any humane and sophisticated American. This brand of thought tends strongly to exonerate the individual from responsibility for failings and weaknesses, and encourages blaming the powers that be as an urgent, and even enlightened, activity.

Black Americans were especially susceptible to this canard. For one thing, centuries of abuse left the race with an inevitable inferiority complex, well documented by black academics and psychologists and readily acknowledged even at black barbecues. For a people with this handicap, focusing on the evil of the system was a fatal attraction, an ever-ready balm for a bruised self-conception. I firmly believe that any ethnic group would have fallen into a similar trap, given equivalent socio-historical variables.

---

## “The race that reaches the mountaintop is one that embraces with vigor its achievements and teaches its children that doing so in the face of obstacles only makes the victory sweeter.”

What this means, however, is that the new double consciousness is not a cynical ploy for power and favors. I am dismayed whenever I see one more writer supposing that black people adopt these ideologies as a kind of politics. Professional victimhood is a symptom of a deep stain on the psyche of a race, and I believe that there can be no true understanding of our current racial dilemma without understanding this.

The new double consciousness explains almost any event having to do with race that floats across our TV screens. For example, recently Harry Belafonte called Colin Powell a “house slave” for downplaying some of his personal political positions in his activities as secretary of state. But of course, people of any color working in an organization find themselves editing their personal predilections in the name of group solidarity. White people view this as how real life works.

Belafonte, however, naturally regards issues like, say, affirmative action as an exception. If residual racism is a sentence to failure rather than an inconvenience to be surmounted, then certainly standards must be lowered for all black people, and just as certainly, if a black official refrains from insisting on this, then we are faced not with real life but with unequivocal moral cowardice.

Another example is how much black scholarship on popular entertainment is based on smoking out stereotypes in characters that few of us would immediately view in that way. Television today depicts black Americans in all walks of life; it is hard not to see a successful middle-class black person on TV if one channel-flips for longer than about 10 minutes. This contrasts so sharply with the situation just 20 years ago that I never cease to be amazed at it.

Yet Donald Bogle’s book *Primetime Blues* two years ago nimbly framed just about anything any black performer does on television *even today* as coded versions of stereotypes that trace back to minstrel shows. Bogle is not seeking political patronage. As a post-Civil Rights Act black American thinker, he has been imprinted with a sense that his job is to show that racism

never dies, that until there is no racism at all in the United States, to be black remains a tragedy.

History also gives us contrasts with today that illuminate the new double consciousness. In 1954, the black singer Marian Anderson did a tour of Asia that was broadcast on the old show *See It Now*. One black viewer wrote a letter of protest in which she complained that the special had focused on tragedies like the Little Rock episode and the fact that the DAR had barred Anderson from singing at Constitution Hall, but had not said much about “the many of our race who are on top.” I find that statement unimaginable from most black writers today—to focus on successful blacks would be seen as a distraction from focusing on the negative. This is not an accident.

### The Coming Change

However, I believe that we are on the brink of a sea change in the new double consciousness. There are now millions of black Americans whose memories begin after 1980: they barely remember the Reagan presidency, Atari, LP records, or McDonald’s hamburgers packaged in Styrofoam boxes; they think of *Cheers* as vintage television, and they do not remember a world without VCRs. More to the point, they missed the Black Panthers and Burn, Baby, Burn, and signs are that quite a few of them are less imprinted by the double consciousness than their parents.

In a poll by Yankelovich Partners for *Time* and CNN in 1997, only 38 percent of black adults said race relations in America were generally good, but 63 percent of black teens did; and 56 percent of black adults said that discrepancies in employment, housing, and income were due to discrimination rather than failure to take advantage of opportunity, while only 35 percent of black teens did.

Also, my conviction is based on recent personal experience. There is a fable that black conservatives end up hunkering down in their living rooms against universal condemnation from the black community. I have not experienced this. Certainly, mainstream reviews of *Losing the Race* were mostly hostile. But that was because the

media always give books by black authors to leftist black academics to review. In the meantime, since August 2000 I have received well over a thousand letters, e-mails, and phone calls about the book from blacks who agree with what I wrote, and every article I write or television appearance I make elicits more. In the Bay Area, where I am especially well known because of local media coverage, I am stopped on the street by a black person who agrees with me at least once every single day of the week. Now, the double consciousness issue is an urgent societal problem, and thus I am not patting myself on the back for being approached for autographs at Starbucks. I mention this experience because it shows one thing: there are massive numbers of black Americans out there who are ready for a new discourse.

After all, it’s not as if anything I have ever written or said has been exactly rocket science. Our modern race problem is less intractable than often supposed. Modern black Americans are well poised to embrace the opportunities now available to them, and most have already done so. The problem that remains is a particular cognitive dissonance—since the 1960s, black Americans have been taught that our successes are mere statistical static because our fates are ultimately in the hands of others. This distracting notion stems from a perversion of sociological analysis that came to reign in the 1960s, and its counterintuitive, anti-empirical, and spiritually destructive nature is increasingly clear to more and more black Americans.

Our job is to disseminate the message as widely as possible that the race that reaches the mountaintop is one that embraces with vigor its achievements, trumpets them to all who will listen, and teaches its children that doing so in the face of obstacles only makes the victory sweeter. I have come to spend a year in New York to help in precisely that effort, and I think that if we can change the general context that young blacks live in—and show older blacks that the sky does not fall in for us if we paint ourselves as victors rather than victims—then in about 25 years, the “race question” that bedevils us will be an issue from the past. ■