

### What Ails Work? Marxist Alienation in *Dark Princess*

“What makes my fellow men who work with their hands so sick of life? What ails the world of work?” (Du Bois 270) Matthew asks, making explicit the sociological issue of labor for capital that W. E. B. Du Bois addresses in *Dark Princess*. Du Bois’s answer to this question draws from and ultimately revises Karl Marx’s ideas on capitalist labor. Thus, an analysis of the novel’s depiction of black labor in 1920s America, its “proletarian content” (Mullen 231), warrants a Marxist perspective. Marx asserts that in a capitalist system “labor’s product” is “alien” and “independent of the producer” (Marx 29) and that “labor is external to the worker” (30). The worker consequently experiences alienation from labor, and because labor is “productive life itself” (31), he also becomes alienated from other workers and from himself. Although Marxist alienation prevents the racial unity needed for African-American uplift in *Dark Princess*, Du Bois presents a solution to the problem of alienation: reuniting physical and intellectual work. Through Matthew’s job progression from scullion to subway digger, Du Bois ultimately constructs physical labor as a form of spiritual uplift key to his utopian goal of world- work.

Matthew’s first forays into “menial” labor as a scullion and a Pullman porter push his ideological development towards Marxism and demonstrate Marxian alienation from others. Matthew’s experiences in these occupations catalyze his “blatant transformation to revolutionary consciousness” (Mullen 231). In the most explicit nod to Marxist rhetoric, Matthew characterizes his fellow scullions as individualistic wolves:

They hated and despised most of their fellows, and they fell like a pack of wolves on the weakest. Yet they all had the common bond of toil; their sweat and the sweat of toilers like them made one vast ocean around the world. Waves of world- sweat droned in

Matthew's head dizzily, and naked men were driven drowning through it, yet snapping, snarling, fighting back each other as they wallowed. (Du Bois 40)

The "common bond of toil" and the metaphoric ocean of "world-sweat" Matthew describes point to his proletarian consciousness. He recognizes that every laborer in the world, himself included, shares a kinship with every other laborer. Sweat, symbolic of physical exertion and labor, connects them; however, Matthew, and Du Bois who speaks through him, paints a bleak reality of disunity in working America. The toilers fight each other as the enemy while they themselves drown. This allegory is an example of what Marx terms alienation from others and the "every man for himself" mentality of capitalism. Workers cannot see beyond their individual situations and project anger at their job onto others. Fellow laborers therefore become competitors. Matthew's experience as a Pullman porter further evidences this Marxist argument. Matthew has organized a porters' strike on the Klan train, when Perigua informs him that the porters will not strike out of fear of losing their jobs to "the scabs," temporary African-American workers "from all over the South" (80) ready to replace the striking porters. Perigua and Matthew's language reveals their anger and sense of alienation concerning the other porters. "I'm going this alone. Get me? Alone!" (82) Perigua tells Matthew. Enraged and desperate, Matthew also distances himself from his fellow porters by labeling them "cowards" (87) and conspires with Perigua to "fight and die for vengeance . . . he the grim lone fighter" (86). This incident and other instances of proletarian conflict validate Dark Princess's sociohistorical authenticity. Despite the book's romantic and fantastical elements, Du Bois's portrayal of labor in America, grounded in social fact, remains realistic and applicable to this day. For example, anthropologist Nicholas De Genova's

2010 ethnographic study on Total Quality Management (TQM) in a Chicago factory echoes the Pullman incident. De Genova asserts that TQM works to “decompose [workers] as members of . . . disparate but cohesive identity blocs” in “openly antagonistic competition with one another, yet all defined nonetheless through their common subordination to the mandates of management” (De Genova 253). Both “fundamentally individualizing” (253) tactics, real-life TQM is analogous to “scabbing” in *Dark Princess*. TQM encourages workers to monitor their co-workers’ production quality, while “scabbing” pits porters against each other to create divisions within the labor force and break the strike. Both capitalist strategies deliberately produce and reinforce worker alienation from other workers, as Marx predicted and Du Bois portrayed.

Furthermore, worker antagonism against each other becomes racialized in both instances, the Chicago factory and the defeated Pullman strike. Perigua accuses Matthew, blaming the African-American porters’ intrinsic cowardice and inferiority for the strike’s failure, “your race are born idiots and cowards!” (82). And in the Chicago factory, workers are “divided along racialized lines” (De Genova 255). Paralleling racial sentiment in *Dark Princess*, Hispanic workers perceive African-American co-workers as “lazy” and resent “the latter group’s seemingly privileged and protected status . . . unduly empowered by their reputed legacy of union and civil rights militancy” (262). Workers project racial stereotypes—African-Americans are cowardly and slothful—onto labor and class grievances that are originally race-neutral. This stereotyping shifts the blame from railroad and factory management to fellow working class members, exacerbating racial tensions and worker competition while obscuring the underlying labor grievance unifying

workers. Inversely, members of one race, such as the African-American community in *Dark Princess*, are also alienated along class lines by “mutual suspicion” (Du Bois 52). Working class African-Americans resent their upper middle-class counterparts, and well-off African-Americans disapprove of poor, uneducated blacks. Matthew remarks, “Their [black laborers] highest ambition is to escape from themselves—from being black, from being poor, from being ugly—into some high heaven from which they can gaze down and despise themselves” (224). As a result, alienation from African-Americans of the same and different class hinders the unified class and racial consciousness necessary to revolutionary change and African-American uplift.

Moreover, when Matthew speaks of an “escape from themselves,” he recognizes that alienation from the self, another consequence of capitalist labor, blocks racial uplift as well. Alienation from the self turns workers into unthinking, unfeeling machines—they “are automata” (270). Working as a Pullman porter, Matthew becomes “the wooden automaton that his job require[s]” with “no feelings, no wishes” (67). Even earlier, Matthew characterizes his scullion’s work as “hard, hateful, heavy, endless, uninteresting, dull, stupid” (38). This long, alliterative listing of negative descriptors emphasizes the hatred Matthew feels towards his job. His work as a scullion and Pullman porter is unenjoyable and monotonous, and so he copes through escapism: Matthew daydreams of “the farm” (37) and “the woman of his dreams and quest” (50). Marx argues that this job dissatisfaction and mental detachment from work proves its “alien character” of being “external to the worker;” that is, “the worker . . . in his work feels outside himself” (Marx 30). Marx calls this self-alienating work “forced labor” in which “the worker’s activity . . . belongs to another” (30). He equates labor for capital to mental

enslavement. Indeed, Matthew shares Marx's sentiment when he writes to Kautilya about his final job as a subway digger: "Only the machines may think . . . We are the slaves. We must obey the machines or suffer" (Du Bois 269). Thus, Du Bois insinuates that African-American emancipation from slavery is an illusory freedom. Enslaved by the "machines" of capitalism and alienated from himself, the black laborer cannot hope to rise above psychological slavery and oppression.

Acknowledging this bleak reality, Du Bois then proposes a cure to the Marxist alienation from self and others that ails labor: "reunite thought and physical work" (266). Matthew's final job digging subway tunnels sets the scene for his intellectual epiphany and spiritual transformation. Once an automaton hating his previous jobs, Matthew gains "a sense of reality in this work" (264) and fully believes in "the worth of the work . . . of its good, of its need" (266). Matthew finally sees purpose in his work and takes pride in it: his job is "little" but "indispensable" (264). Furthermore, he reconnects with his "soul," his sense of self, through conscious participation in physical labor. Matthew feels "no compulsion to pretend . . . to be that which he [does] not want to be" (266). Spiritually fulfilled, he is "keen and happy with the spirit of the thing" (270). Matthew's philosophical conception of self, what he terms "soul" or "the spirit of the thing," and its relationship to work bears overt religious connotations. He declares multiple times that "Work is God" (266). Under a Marxist interpretation, the aphorism suggests that Matthew and his fellow subway diggers are playing at God and realizing the creative potential of the human species. Matthew writes Kautilya, "We have built a little world down here below the earth, where we live and dream" (266). Marx explains the purpose of this microcosmic construction: "man proves himself a conscious species-being . . . and

sees himself in a world that he has created” (Marx 31-32). In other words, Matthew’s physical labor is crucial identity work; man reworks nature to reflect himself, mirroring God’s genesis of mankind in his own image. Matthew revels in man’s mastery over nature: “We touch a bit of metal: the sullen rock gives up its soul and flies to a thousand fragments” (Du Bois 270). This conscious act deifies the human species above animals and machines of lesser intelligence. Yet Matthew’s divine conception of their work and self-realization does not reach his unthinking co-workers with “deaf ears and eyes that see nothing” (270). Matthew laments their ignorance: “If we could see the Plan and understand . . . But no, of the end of what we are doing we can only guess vaguely. The only thing we really know is this shovelful of dirt” (269). Again, Matthew elevates their work to that of God’s by capitalizing “plan.” Nevertheless, because the laborers cannot “see the Plan” and know the aim of their work, they remain ignorant and debased, at the level of animals. Rather than conscious, productive activity, work becomes oppressive and mechanical—alien.

What can be done to understand this plan and therefore combat the Marxist alienation from others and from the self that opposes racial unity and uplift, respectively? Du Bois makes his position very explicit in the text through Matthew’s final theses of world-work: “They that do the world’s work must do its thinking. The thinkers, dreamers, poets of the world must be its workers” (266) and “Only working thinkers can unite thinking workers” (286). Matthew himself personifies this synthesis of intellectual and physical work; he is well-educated and appreciates fine art, yet experiences working class labor firsthand as a scullion and comes to understand its value as a subway digger. In this light, *Dark Princess*’s utopian ending takes on a new dimension. Matthew alludes to a

metaphorical marriage when he states that the “divorce [of thought and physical work] has been a primal cause of disaster” (266). Thus, Matthew and Kautilya’s marriage symbolizes not only the international aspect of world-work but also its proletarian content, the reunion of thought and labor. Matthew and Kautilya’s divine child, then, is also the product of intellectual and physical work, Du Bois’s proposed vehicle and savior of world-work: “Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!” (311).

In responding to Marx’s theory of alienation in capitalist labor and offering a new conception of work as an avenue to labor reform and racial uplift, Dark Princess addresses a pressing societal issue of 1920s America that still exists today: the undervaluation and alienation of working class Americans under the capitalist system. Maids, janitors, retail and restaurant workers—these marginalized members of society perform necessary jobs and yet are underpaid and often impoverished. In effect, Du Bois’s dream of “working thinkers” and “thinking workers” has not and probably never will come to pass. His message, however, offers practical insight and should not be dismissed as pure fancy. To effectively tackle this problem, the well- educated and the policymakers, those who can effect reform, must listen to workers’ complaints and mentally step into their shoes, so to speak. And if workers are to articulate their grievances as “thinking workers,” they must be educated and self-aware. Thus, higher quality education rests logically the first step towards progress in America.

## Works Cited

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