

W.E.B. DuBois on the Meaning of Work

*From a speech by W.E.B. Dubois in 1953 at the California Peace Crusade.
Cobbled together from the Pacifica Radio Archives and additional sources.*

There is in America today, a confusion of minds, so tragic and misleading, that our whole thought and philosophy is distorted. At the very time that economics, that is the study of work and income, is of foremost importance to our well being, economics as economics is not being studied in our schools. Neither in the elementary schools, nor in colleges are students learning about the philosophy of money and exchange, production and trade, wealth and savings.

Our university students are pouring into chemistry and physics, and deserting history and sociology. Why? Because to us, the basic problem is how large an income we can get, how much money we can control. What careers for our children will ensure them the most wealth? The object of our ambition is rising to higher and higher incomes brackets. And what we see as progress is escaping from manual labor—the white-collar jobs—thence to employing others to work for us. Then coming into possession of so much property that we may we need not work for ourselves, so that we may sit in stark idleness or grovel in dissipation, having never learned anything to do except to arrange to have nothing to do. (Laughter in audience)

From this contradiction arises the strange paradox that the poverty for the worker must be perpetual, in order that he be compelled to work for the rich. For most Americans, this paradox is at once true and impossible. They sit dumb and bemused before it.

(Possible editing of tape to skip to a later section of his speech)

What is life, but the attempt of human beings to be happy and contented in a world with which all its ill, has a mass of sun and waters, of trees and flowers, of beauty and love. To realize this

at its highest we need food, clothes, and shelter. We need health of body, and balance of mind. We want to know what this world is, how its wonderful laws act, who its peoples are, and how they think and act, and how what they have done in ages past may guide us today. We want to see, realize, and conceive beauty in form and line and color. We want to know our own souls and the myriad-sided souls of others. And then to imagine what might be if what is should grow to what we wish. This is life.

This is the end of the fairy tale of life. We know this. And yet we sit dumb and muddled before it. Seeing the world as a twisted contradiction, yet the problem is simple. We have a rich land—earth and water, minerals and vegetables of every sort, breath-taking scenery in mountain, ocean, river, and vale. We have combed the Earth of its races for its strength, intelligence, and daring.

All that is asked is that each of us do what we can, first to supply our own wants in food and shelter, health and learning. But more than that, that we do for others what they need done and cannot do for themselves, and yet which must be done lest we suffer. Beyond that there are many tasks, which all working together, can do faster and better than many working apart. “All for one and one for all” is an axiom of life. And to refuse to let all work in common would be as silly as to let no one work alone. All this is clear and true. And yet, it is blinded in our eyes.

The object of work for many is not to work. The end of labor is not to do what must be done, but to get somebody else to do it. The wealth of the nation—the land and water, the coal and oil, the iron and aluminum—aught not to belong to the nation, some say, but to those who by chance or cheating, have legal power to make you pay their price for what God gave to them.

Even if ten-thousand men combined, and in sweat and sacrifice, make steel, wheat, corn, meat, or shoes, the results of a combined labor belongs to one or a few of them, while the others scramble to keep from starving.

What has gone wrong? It is clear the workers don't understand the meaning of work.

Work is service, not gain. The object of work is life, not income. The reward of production is plenty, not private property. We should measure the prosperity of the nation not by the number of millionaires, but by the absence of poverty; the prevalence of health; the efficiency of the public schools; and the number of people who can, do read, worthwhile books.

Toward all this we do strive, but instead of marching breast forward, we stagger and wander thinking that food is raised not to eat but to sell at good profit; houses are not to shelter the masses but to make real estate agents rich; and solemnly declaring that without private profit there can be no food or homes. All of this is ridiculous. It has been disproven centuries ago.

The greatest thinkers of every age have inveighed against concentration of wealth in the hands of the few and against the poverty, and disease and ignorance in the masses of men.

We have tried every method of reform. A favorite effort has been force—by war. But the loot stolen by murder went to the generals and not to the soldiers. We tried through religion to lead men to sacrifice and right treatment of their fellow men, but the priests too often stole the fruits of sacrifice and concealed the truth.

In the 17th century, of our modern European era we sought leadership in science and dreamed that justice might rule through natural law, but we misinterpreted that law to mean that most men were slaves and white Europeans were the right masters of the world.

In the 18th century, we turned toward the ballot in the hands of the worker to force a just division

of the fruits of labor among the toilers. But the capitalists, happening on black slavery and land monopoly and on private monopoly of capital, forced the modern worker into a new slavery which built a new civilization of the world with colored slaves at the bottom, with white serfs between, and the power still in the hands of the rich.

But one consideration halted this plan. The serfs and even the slaves had begun to learn to think. Some bits of education had stimulated them and some of the real scientists of the world began to use their knowledge for the masses and not solely for the ruling classes. It became more and more a matter of straight thinking.

What is work? It was what all must contribute to the common good. No man has a right to be idle. It is the bounden duty of each to contribute his best to the well being of all, of what men gain by the efforts of all have a right to share, not to the extent of all that they may want, but certainly to the extent of what they really need. ...

You must let the world know that this is your simple and unwavering program: the abolition of poverty, disease and ignorance the world over among women and men of all races, religions and color; to accomplish this by just control of concentrated wealth and overthrow of monopoly to ensure that income depends on work and not on privilege or change; that freedom is the heritage of man—and that by freedom we do not mean freedom from the laws of nature, but freedom to think and believe and express our thoughts and dream our dreams and to maintain our rights against secret police, witchhunters or any other sort of a modern fool or tyrant.

The four freedoms come not by slavery to corporations and monopoly of the press, cinema, radio and television but by united social effort for the common good so that decently fed, healthy and intelligent people can be sure of work, not afraid of growing old, and hold high their heads to think and say what they damn please without fear of liars, informers or sneaking FBI.

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