The Souls Of Black Folk: Economic Issues Raised In A Novel

Although some may argue that economic power is the key to liberation, according to W.E.B Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk, one must recognize that there are other factors such as racial prejudice that doesn't allow economic growth to even be attempted. Economic growth means nothing to African Americans if there is not a shift in the racial paradigm and improvement in the education system. On the contrary, in Simone Du Beauvoir's The Second Sex, economic growth and the economic conditions for that growth, is essential for the liberation of women due to its ability to remove them from the grip of their male counterparts.

In W.E.B Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk, economic power is important but not the only necessary factor for the oppressed to reach true freedom. Economic stability does improve the quality of life for African Americans, but in order to have secured freedom, there must be an acknowledgement and active change towards the racial prejudices. During the era of slavery, slaves had no knoweldge about the economy or how to earn money which resulted in many emancipated slaves stuck in debt, Du Bois states, "I will not stop to ask whose duty it was, but I insist it was the duty of some one to see that these workingmen were not left alone and unguided, without capital, without land, without skill, without economic organization." (Du Bois, pg) Emancipated slaves were thrown into society without any knowledge or skills that would help them flee from their previous status. A system was put into place that ensured African Americans could not improve their quality of life. Although this may seem like a direct argument proving why economic power is vital, it is important to remember that this had racial undertones. Acknowledging racial prejudices and seeking solution to combat it are as, if not more important in ensuring freedom for African Americans. "But the same system has in other cases resulted in the refusal of whole communities to recognize the right of a [African Americans] to change his habitation and to be master of his own fortunes." African Americans were forced to live in black communities due to the discrimination and lack of opportunity to afford to live anywhere else. This created a cyclical effect where black families lived in black communities due to not being able to find economic opportunity outside but could never get out due to being in a neighborhood where they provided no chance at economic improvement. (Du Bois, pg.) Du Bois believed that apart from economic power, education is just as important. He states, " Of every five dollars spent for public education in the State of Georgia, the white schools get four dollars and the [African Americans] one dollar." (Du Bois, pg.) Education, and proper education is essential for securing freedom because it provides African Americans skills that aren't just agricultural based, but potential high earning skills that white people obtained. According to Du Bois, there wasn't much effort towards improving that aspect, if anything, it is just ensuring that the educational division remains prominent.

In Simone De Beauvoir's The Second Sex, the discourse leads to the conclusion that economic power is sufficient for women to secure freedom. According to De Beauvoir, "civil liberties remain abstract if there is no corresponding economic autonomy"(De Beauvoir, p.721) because "work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom." (De Beauvoir, p.721) She contrasts this to the right to vote, emphasizing that it basically has no real value and isn't enough to obtain true freedom. If you can't sustain yourself without depending on anyone else, no matter what rights you gain, you are still tied down to the oppressor. But it is important to note that although

women can seek liberation through economic means, it is not in their current economic conditions. De Beauvoir believes that a socialist society is most conducive towards fulfilling the economic desires of a woman, or anyone for that matter. Socialism dismantles the economic grip that the bourgeoisie have over the proletariats, men and women alike under capitalism. (De Beauvoir p. 721-722) Under capitalism no working class person has true economic freedom, let alone women. So in order for women to truly gain their freedom that De Beauvoir advocates for, the entire economic system would have to change. Although the economic conditions may not be truly correct for reaching freedom, it is still through economic power. It is not just for women to gain economic power, it is for the system for it to be allowed to happen. The desire to have freedom is so strong that women would be willing to work for lower wages, if it meant any ounce of newly founded independence. De Beauvoir states, “end up accepting remuneration far inferior to that of which a man demands.” (De Beauvoir, p. 134) As long as it meant they had a chance at freedom, they would be willing to make much less because it isn’t so much about the monetary value, it’s more of what that money means to their situation as a woman. De Beauvoir states in a brief anecdote of a woman cleaning hotels, stating, “I never asked anyone for anything” (De Beauvoir, pg. 721) emphazing the meaning behind their own self sufficiency. She was working a low level job, but was very proud that she could provide for herself.

Some might argue that this led to an issue in relation to men, because when women began working, since they were being paid less, more employers wanted to hire them. This ultimately upset men because they believed they were losing out on job opportunities that should of been reserved for a man. And although economic power is seen as what is necessary to obtain freedom, some may disagree, believing that the monetary power doesn’t equal to the social status of a man. This could be backed up by De Beauvoir’s statement, “Even the woman who has emancipated herself economically from man is still not in a moral, social, or psychological situation identical to his.” (De Beauvoir, pg. 723) There are experiences and situations that a woman could not have because she is not a man. The world will forever see her as a woman and the attributes that come along with it. Although valid, the economic power does provide a huge shift within the dynamics between a man and woman, in simple terms, a woman no longer has to be dependent on a man.

The Souls of Black Folk and The Second Sex both frame their argument around the concept of monetary development. Du Bois takes an approach that acknowledges the societal bias that inhibit economic growth. He feels one must tackle all aspects, such as civil rights, that may be oppressing African Americans. De Beauvoir views economic growth as the strongest way to bridge the gap between men and women.