

The Road Not Taken: The Fate of W.E.B. Du Bois's Science of Society

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A response:

The contradictions of American civilization are tremendous. Freedom of political discussion is difficult; elections are not free and fair The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth. . . . Present profit is valued higher than future need. . . . I know the United States. It is my country and the land of my fathers. It is still a land of magnificent possibilities. It is still the home of noble souls and generous people. But it is selling its birthright. It is betraying its mighty destiny.

Those words so accurately describing a stunned American society in mid-November of 2016 are not my own. They come instead from a description written nearly fifty years ago by W.E.B Du Bois – at that time a ninety-year-old scholar whose pioneering contributions to sociology were absent from nearly all histories of the discipline (Du Bois 1968: 418-19). Today, all of us stand indebted to Professor Morris for the major contribution he has made in reclaiming the scientific sociology invented and developed so meticulously by this scholar and activist.

Words, it has been said, function like torches revealing to us the details of what had been cloaked in darkness. In that sense, “W.E.B. Du Bois at the Center: From Science, Civil Rights Movement, to Black Lives Matter, 2016” serves as a textual searchlight illuminating for us the principles for empirical research and radical scholarship pioneered by Du Bois but long obliterated from the sociological record. There is a certain amount of ironic justice that the presentation by Professor Morris of this erased history takes place not too many blocks away from the building housing the Ministry of Information where George Orwell developed his ideas for *1984* about histories deleted by disposal down “memory holes” and “unpersons” erased from existence. In a number of ways, the sociologist Du Bois and the fruits of his scholarship suffered in real life the fictionalized processes Orwell described. Orthodox sociology in the United States had its own version of the Ministry of Truth and it was not only Du Bois singled out for this form of mistreatment. Like his compatriots Florence Kelley, Isabel Eaton and others at Chicago’s Hull House whose

own pioneering urban research paralleled and often overlapped with his own, Du Bois often found that those of his ideas for a science of society not erased often became magically transformed into brainchildren of others. In recounting the ill treatment accorded Hull House's sociological pioneers, one recent encyclopedic survey of sociological theory provided a description easily transferable to what happened to Du Bois and his work (Ritzer 2011: 205-06).

That they are not today known or recognized in conventional histories of the discipline as sociologists or sociological theorists is a chilling testimony to the power of gender politics within the discipline of sociology and to sociology's essentially unreflective and uncritical interpretation of its own practices As the developing discipline of sociology marginalized these women as sociologists and sociological theories, it often incorporated their research methods into its own practices, while using their activism as an excuse to define these women as 'not sociologists.' Thus they are remembered as social activists and social workers rather than sociologists.

While gender politics clearly had much to do with elimination of what was later reclaimed as the Chicago Women's School of Sociology (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998), there can be little doubt that the power of racist ideology and practices within the developing discipline of American sociology in the late 19th and early 20th century played a decisive role in assigning Du Bois and the sociological science he created to the dustbin of history. As Professor Morris points out, it is impossible to understand the forces intent on silencing of the mighty voice of W.E.B Du Bois without an understanding of the racism permeating American society and mainstream sociology throughout his life.

I wish to argue here that the racism alone is not sufficient to explain the fate of the scholar responsible for making sociology a genuine science, rather than a philosophy, of society. There were other factors, too, compounding the racially motivated mistreatment of Du Bois and his accomplishments by those occupying powerful positions in the discipline. In order to gain an understanding of these silencing and eradicating processes, I have followed in Du Bois' footsteps by focusing on historical and societal forces at work during the formative years of American sociology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The condition of the working class in the United States in 1899

It was not until the latter decades of 19th century that the character of immigration into North America began to be transformed. At that time, genocidal military campaigns and civilian expansion proved successful in displacing and exterminating native groups who had tried vainly to defend their homelands. This marked the closing of the frontier and ended the process whereby European immigrants earlier could escape the regime of industrializing American capitalism by taking and farming relatively cheap and arable land. Henceforth, penniless immigrants had little choice but to take employment in the explosively expanding industries of urban America. This coincided with the beginning waves of African-American migration of former slaves and their offspring from the rural South to the Urban North. From 1880 to 1910, nearly eight million eastern and central Europeans together with four million Italians were funneled into the industrializing cities of North America. These newcomers, who were predominantly peasants and land laborers together with agricultural works up from slavery became America's reserve army of labor. Given their rapidly growing numbers and the brutal working and living conditions of their lives under capitalism, this new working class constituted a massive and potential danger to those benefiting from expropriated labor (Kiernan 2005; Stone and Kuznick 2012; Zinn 1994).

The economic depressions and recessions that had become reoccurring features of capitalist American since its beginnings served to make this danger a reality. In 1877, the longest depression in the history of the United States brought about a general strike so massive that it became known as "the great upheaval" (Brecher 2014). Again, in 1886 and 1887, a nationwide wave of strikes took place. According to one student of this period, these protests against degradation and oppression "bore in every way the aspect of a social war. A frenzied hatred of labour for capital was shown in every important strike" (Commons 1918:205-06). In 1892, still another massive strike by miners, railroad workers and ironworkers was put down only after thousands of military troops, police and private detectives were mobilized. Two years after Small launched the department, striking train workers in

the Chicago destroyed 700 railroad cars while 10,000 protestors marched to support them. This led to the arrival of 15,000 troops brought in to suppress the strike and the ensuing battle led to the deaths of 30 strikers, the wounding of 57 other demonstrators and property damage exceeding eighty million dollars. During this period, a visitor from Great Britain found wealthy Americans pervaded by a sense of living over a mine of discontent “and the some day this mine would explode and blow society into the air” (Brecher 1972:92-93). In the 1890s, there were one thousand strikes a year; by 1904, there were four thousand (Zinn 1984:42). For those whose stake in the maintenance of industrial order was greatest, the immediate response to labor unrest and militancy was the three fold: the establishment of large and well-armed state militias, recruitment of equally well-armed private armies of so-called industrial police and the construction of huge fortress-like armories compete with gun ports in urban centers (Brecher 2014, 1972).

The Hegemonic Tale and Subversive Stories

As an afterthought, American industrialists turned to those academics beginning to lay claim to a science of society and established the Social Science Association to study the problems of immigration and urbanization. This association, financed and dominated by the so-called “Robber Barons” served in turn to set the stage and define the program for the emergence of the first department of sociology in the history of American universities (Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974).¹ Central to what constitutes the origin myth of American sociology is the University of Chicago, transformed from a small Baptist bible school owing to millions of dollars donated by John D. Rockefeller. It was here in 1892 that Albion Small, its first chairman, began assembling what was soon proclaimed to be the world’s first sociology department. In addition to launching *The American Journal of Sociology*, Small devoted himself to recruiting Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, W.I. Thomas, and a number of other men to his faculty that was to become the dominant force in American sociology for a number of decades. Situated in a niche in the fastest growing city in the world at that time, the main focus of these sociologists was with investigating the problems related to massive population size, immigration and the

anonymity of urban life. According to the orthodox version of the department's birth and development, these men for the first three decades of the department's history devoted themselves to developing theories mainly focused about various aspects of life in cities sometimes assisted by a group of women from Hull House serving as data collectors for their theories (Deegan 1988; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998; Seltzer and Haldar 2015).

The first challenges to this long-standing hegemonic tale of the Chicago School began to appear in the 1970s when a new generation of sociologists began to examine the motivations and backgrounds of the founding fathers and their actual, rather than fictive, contributions to sociology. Like Professor Morris reclaiming the erased history of Du Bois' pioneering work in making sociology an empirical science rather than a speculative armchair philosophy of society interspersed here and there with "car window" anecdotes and observations, other scholars too began then to retrieve erased pasts and to challenge the hegemonic tale of how sociology developed in the United States. According to one critical study, the key figures of the Chicago School in its early days were deadly "afraid of proletarian socialism" (Birnbaum 1971:218). According to another critic, the members of the department shared a view that the social problems of industrialization were mainly due to the anonymity and great size of cities "which were taken to be essentially alike, rather than varying with the economy, class system or the property institutions of the particular city" (Gouldner 1970:21).

Men who shared remarkably similar backgrounds staffed the department of sociology first led by Small and later dominated by Robert Park. They were middle-aged and nearly all were descended from the early Anglo-Saxon immigrants to the New World. In addition, nearly every single member of the department in these early decades was from rural America. If not from farms, they were from small country towns. Nearly all came from petit bourgeois families headed by fathers who were merchants, ministers, well-to-do farmers and small town professionals. Park's father, for example, was a well-to-do wholesale grocer. And finally, like Small, a product of a theological school, many of these men were either ordained in the protestant ministry or had received training as ministers (Collins and Makowsky

2010; Deegan 1988; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1974). While it might be thought that this linkage between sociology and the ministry only existed during academic sociology's early days, a study carried out in 1964 of nearly seven thousand members of the American Sociological Association found that nearly 28 per cent of the sociologists who responded to the questionnaire had thought, at one time or another, of joining the ministry (Sprehe 1967).

Given their shared class backgrounds and pronounced concern with morality, it is not difficult to guess what the men of the early Chicago School defined as the most pressing issue for their kind of sociology. For them, the main social problem was the rapidly industrializing city and its explosively growing poorly paid and ill-housed working class. For these early sociologists who had grown up as well-off members of local elites in small towns where everyone knew their place and moral norms were firmly enforced, the city "instead of containing clean, law-abiding, church-going middle class citizens . . . was dirty and crowded and full of crime, drunkenness, mental illness, illegitimacy, divorce, delinquency, pauperism, radicalism and political corruption" (Collins and Makowsky 1972: 73). Their views were clearly affected by the bloody battles between labor and capital taking place on their doorstep. Six years prior to Small's launching of the department, the so-called Haymarket Massacre, a battle between workers and police, led to the deaths of a number of police and the subsequent trials and hangings of three workers, most probably innocent (Zinn 1994: 271-73). And as earlier noted, the deaths of scores of workers and damages from the railroad strike took place when the department of sociology was only two years old.

In this highly charged atmosphere, Small and his colleagues were particularly concerned with riots, strikes and other forms of urban disorganization, but as one critic pointed out "they rarely analyzed deeply the harsher realities of social oppression – especially gender, class and racial oppression – in the development of cities".² This was evidenced by the world's first funded sociological research project led by W.I. Thomas. It was financed by the then immense sum of fifty thousand dollars donated by a wealthy woman frightened of what newspapers called "Polish crime" represented by acts of "violence from otherwise stolid and acquiescent men from Poland working in Chicago's factories" (Collins and Makowsky 1972:159). And

given the class allegiance of the other men of the department with their small town elite upbringing, it seems reasonable to guess that they, too, shared the same fears of this society matron about the dangerous working class inhabiting what they saw as the jungle-like urban environments of Chicago and other rapidly growing cities of that era.

One indicator of this intellectual climate was provided by Small who was instrumental in the sacking in 1895 of Edward Beams by the university. In the previous year, Beams, an economist, had expressed support for striking railroad workers. According to one historian, Small then “used the schools American Journal of Sociology to try to stop those who expressed support for Beams” (Seim 2016:31). This was very much in keeping with the ruling class-bound ethos of the department. In the very first issue of *The American Journal of Sociology* (1895: 1), Small made clear his position in the conflict between capital and labor and one we could assume was shared by his colleagues by declaring that

Whatever various individuals may hold about the relative influence which different classes ought to have upon civic action, there is practically no difference of opinion in Chicago about the fundamental necessity of basing social prosperity of all sorts upon a secure foundation of business principles.

No data existed supporting Small’s claim about this pro-capital view shared by all Chicagoans, but this passage serves as an excellent illustration of the kind of social philosophizing presented as sociological science at that time. As Professor Morris has shown, Du Bois regarded such “car window sociology” as a pseudoscience of opinions, hunches and guesses and he saw it as his mission to replace these kinds of armchair musings with a genuine science of society. But as Professor Morris also made clear, rather than pontificate about the need for a genuine scientific sociology, Du Bois went to work to create it by situating himself as a participant observing and data-collecting member of the community whose ways of living he wished to understand. And in so doing, he shamed and in some ways, ridiculed, those armchair scholars of urban disorganization whose class-bound fears of the dangerous working class kept them in their comfort zones far from those about whom they claimed so much expertise.

I contend that these kinds of class-bound attitudes, or classism to use a more contemporary term, compounded the already existing racism of mainstream academic sociologists at that time and both of these sets of prejudices contributed to the silencing of W.E.B. Du Bois and the erasure of his achievements. Long before Alvin Gouldner described a later generation of certain Chicago sociologists as the “zookeepers,” there existed in the same department a cohort holding similar views and intent on studying and displaying at a distance rare specimens safely locked behind bars and ghetto walls (Gouldner 1968).

One representative of this curator stance was Robert Park, whose animosity to Du Bois was clearly influenced by his longtime role as the ghostwriter for Booker T. Washington, Du Bois’ main opponent in arguments about policies for achieving equality for African-Americans. Park viewed the city from a Social Darwinist perspective and found it to be a jungle-like site of fierce competition for space and resources between various species as he sometimes put it. Their conflicts, he claimed, followed a cyclical pattern of invasion, penetration, and competition culminating in victory for one of the antagonists (Park 1967). While claiming great sociological expertise about urban life, Park also pontificated about his knowledge of the Negro who he infamously characterized as being “neither an intellectual or idealistHis métier is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady of the races” (Park 1918/1950:280). A review of Park’s writings, for example, provides little evidence of his urban fieldwork despite his bragging that “I have actually covered more ground tramping about in cities in different parts of the world than any other living man”(Madge 1962:89).

Unlike the boastful Park and other armchair theorists of his class background so fearful of the working classes of the cities they claimed to know so intimately, Du Bois was a child of the working class. Though he was the first member of his family to graduate from high school and even though he possessed the first doctorate ever earned by an African American at Harvard, Du Bois’ father was a barber and itinerant laborer and his worked throughout her life as a domestic servant. He grew up as the member of a tiny Black working class community in a small city in Massachusetts and

after his father left the family, two of his uncles, a waiter and a barber, became the adult men in his family (Levering 2009; Mullen 2016). Whilst the men of the Chicago School shared experiences of small town life at the top of the class pyramid, Du Bois spent his childhood and adolescence at the bottom.

Though Du Bois seldom brought up the class background of his family in the many sociological texts he produced, it was most certainly present but latent in the conduct of his research in a range of poor working class Afro-American communities. This was particularly true of his fieldwork in the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia leading to the publication in 1899 of *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* - the first thoroughly sociological investigation of an urban community in the United States. His research project began when Du Bois and his young wife moved into this district in August of 1896. There, they lived in a one-room apartment above a cafeteria until January of 1898. Large numbers of the African-Americans living in this ward were recent immigrants, often illiterate, from the South who competed for all too few low-paying jobs as unskilled workers and domestic servants. Crime rates in the area were high, but as Du Bois emphasized in a fair part of these statistics reflected race prejudice among Philadelphia's White police force. In a famous passage from the book, he wrote: "Crime is a phenomenon of organized social life, and is the open rebellion of the individual against his social environment" (Du Bois 1899/1995: 235). Many residents in Philadelphia's wealthier districts viewed the Seventh Ward with many of the same fears as those found in the writings of Small, Park and other "car window" sociologists claiming urban expertise. According to one of his biographers, Du Bois lived and researched in a district regarded as "the bane of respectable Philadelphia, its population the very embodiment of 'the dangerous classes' troubling the sleep of the modernizing gentry" (Levering 2009: 132).

Yet nowhere in *The Philadelphia Negro* do such references to these kinds of dangers appear. For Du Bois who was making sociology by doing it, there was no place in his writings for stereotypical and essentialist views of the community of which he was a participating, observing and investigating member. Nowhere in *The Philadelphia Negro* do we find Du Bois voicing fears about his personal safety while participating and observing the lives of his neighbors. Armed only with his interview

schedules and writing instruments, Du Bois would leave his apartment each morning and begin to knock on the doors of every building on those streets he had chosen to examine that day. At each dwelling, he interviewed those adults living there using questions drawn from the six interview schedules he had created to provide him with questions to ask his interviewees about their lives, homes, families, community institutions, activities outside the home and so on. Day after day, month after month, he collected data in his way. At the end of his fieldwork, he had accumulated the life histories of the entire African-American population of the Seventh Ward – nearly ten thousand women, men and children (Levering 2009: 136).

In the preparing *The Philadelphia Negro* for publication, he included supplementary materials from the US Census and introduced the use of bar graphs and color-coded maps of the residences on each block showing the class membership of the households in the Seventh Ward. A number of researchers have suggested that these displays owed much to earlier accounts of urban life in England carried out by Charles Booth and by the team of Hull House researchers led by Florence Kelley (Bulmer, Bales and Sklar 1991; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998: 244-50). Few of these and other researchers have examined another more likely way Kelley influenced Du Bois' research and understanding of the place of the city under emergent capitalism. Often overlooked in discussions of their longtime roles as friends, fellow activists and research compatriots is Kelley's work in translating for her friend Friedrich Engels leading to the publication in English of *The Condition of The Working Class in England in 1844* – the precursor of later investigations of urban life in Great Britain by Charles Booth and Henry Mayhew. In reading of how Du Bois learned about and interpreted the conditions of the lives of residents of the Seventh Ward, one is struck by how similar his account is to the understandings of the lives of workers in Manchester Engels gained as he was guided by Mary Burns, his common-law wife and factory worker, who "inducted him into working class circles and into the domestic life of the Manchester proletariat" (Marcus 1975: 98-99).

We can only speculate today about how "car window" sociologists at Chicago and elsewhere reacted to the publication of *The Philadelphia Negro*. One indicator how this book was received by the sociological establishment at that time is found in

a tiny positive notation about it contained among other notices on a single page of the American Journal of Sociology published four years after Du Bois' volume first appeared (Levering 2009: 743). By that time, Du Bois had already become a professor at Atlanta University where he stayed until 1914 before leaving to become fulltime director of research and publicity for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and editor of *The Crisis*, the monthly magazine of the NAACP. During his stay at Atlanta, he directed the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory where for nearly two decades, Du Bois and his colleagues and students carried out a myriad of research projects on a wide range of different aspects of African-American life, such as, schooling, employment, family life, housing, race relations. These resulted in scores of reports and over twenty volumes of the *Atlanta University Study of the Negro Problems*.

This immense body of literature bears witness to what Du Bois' instilled among his students and fellow researchers: namely, that if a sociological report was to yield valid empirically-based findings, this required researchers to make use of the techniques of methodological triangulation incorporating quantitative and qualitative measures he had developed. His mode of sociological inquiry required investigators to conduct surveys, to examine historical sources and census records, and to act as participant observers *in and of* the lives of the groups they studied (Wright 2002).

Unlike Small, Park and others of the early Chicago School devoting themselves to the construction of elaborate theoretical models and maps of urban life, Du Bois and his students, like the women and men of Hull House, began with the collection of social and historical data and built upwards. Though later appearing in a book about the work of the Hull House researchers (Langermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998: 245), this passage may be understood as also encapsulating the central thrust of the scientific sociological work pioneered by Du Bois and carried out during several later decades by his colleagues and many students:

Their typical mode of analysis is to begin from the condition of human pain, analytically and sympathetically described, moving to show both its causes in social structure and its consequences for the larger community and society.

Concluding Remarks

In Orwell's dystopian world, "unpersons" were those individuals whose ideas and deeds mocked, questioned and otherwise threatened ruling ideology. Once defined in this way, all evidence of their existence disappeared forever – shoved down the "memory" hole. Looking back at the life and accomplishments of William Edward Burkhardt Du Bois makes clear that his deeds and ideas made him an "unperson" writ large for the sociological establishment. His mocking of their "car window" philosophizing masquerading as sociological science was one thing, but his safe passage among and humanizing of the dangerous working classes was another unforgivable sin. These transgressions against powerful were reinforced by the style of his writing. Not only did Du Bois devote his life as an activist scholar to challenging sociological, political and racist orthodoxies, but he wielded his pen in a manner unmatched by others laying claim to academic sociology. In contrast to the prolix, turgid and stale style of the orthodox sociologists of his age and later who would rather use ten words when one would suffice, Du Bois writings were described in a recent book on sociological theory as being exciting blends of "intellectual argumentation, song, prayer, poetry, irony, parable, data, riddles, analogy, and declaration" (Allan 2005: 294).

For those staking out and reinforcing positions of power in the early decades of academic sociology, Du Bois came to represent not only a threat to their own definitions of the discipline, but even more as a dangerous role model for future generations of sociologists. The school of sociology he established in Atlanta and the legion of young scholars it produced represented a massive body of evidence of the threat Du Bois posed for the future of the discipline. For the powerful, it was therefore imperative that his fate should serve as an example to frighten future sociologists tempted to follow in his activist, methodological and theoretical footsteps. In order to insure that sociology would remain safe, the sociological establishment at that time began working to consign Du Bois and his legacy to their version of the "memory hole." With their control of the journals and other trappings of academic power such as conferences and funding, they succeeded in their endeavors and Du Bois and his influence was no more – or so it seemed.

However, as decades went by, the gloss wore off the Chicago School and as one study of the history of American sociology noted "the principal shortcoming of

the Chicago school turned out to be the thinness of its theorizing, and this in the end was to be its downfall” (Collins and Makowsky 2010: 164). Despite this defeat, the erasure of Du Bois and his works by the established did achieve one major desired effect upon later generations entering the field. The mistreatment of this activist scholar did not go unnoticed by those planning to make careers in sociology. The proof, it is said, is in the pudding and thus it is fitting to end this commentary with the kind of quantitative evidence Du Bois demanded of his researchers to show how effective the taboo on activist research had for American sociology. In 1985, a content analysis of all articles published between 1936 and 1982 in the *American Sociological Review*, the official journal of the American Sociological Association, yielded several interesting though depressing findings. It needs to be emphasized that this period covering nearly fifty years of American history was one witnessing the near collapse of capitalism, massive unemployment, bloody struggles between labor and capital, the rise of native and international fascism, World War II, the Cold War, the witch-hunts of McCarthyism, movements for civil rights and racial and sexual equality, near-genocidal wars in Korea and Viet Nam, and waves of anti-war and anti-imperialism protests. Yet, only five per cent of the articles in this prestigious journal touched upon these events and social upheavals, wars and struggles for equality and human rights. The single topic receiving most attention from the professional community during those five decades was the decidedly non-controversial issue of mate selection (Wilner 1985). For me, these statistics stand as a macabre monument to the disciplinary impact on the profession produced by the mistreatment of the scholar and activist who singlehandedly crafted the first thoroughgoing science of society.

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