

EDITORIAL

Why Now? Thoughts on the Du Boisian Revolution

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial collection, five sociologists share their opinions on why there has been a recent proliferation of scholarship on Du Bois, and summarize their own position in relation to this intellectual area. Ranging from reflections on how they “discovered” Du Bois’s works, through to assessments of American sociology’s reception of Du Bois’s scholarship, the idea of this brief piece is to provide an insight into some of the potential driving forces behind the boom in Du Boisian scholarship.

1 | Introduction

In this editorial collection, five sociologists share their opinions on why there has been a recent proliferation of scholarship on Du Bois, and summarize their own position in relation to this intellectual area. Ranging from reflections on how they “discovered” Du Bois’s works, through to assessments of American sociology’s reception of Du Bois’s scholarship, the idea of this brief piece is to provide an insight into some of the potential driving forces behind the boom in Du Boisian scholarship.

Given that the publication of Aldon Morris’ (2015) *The Scholar Denied* is often construed somewhat of a turning point in the Du Boisian revolution, we will begin this piece with Morris’ reflection. We will then turn to two historical accounts of Du Bois’s canonization offered by José Itzigsohn and Ali Meghji, before turning to Fatma Müge Göçek’s narrative of how she came to contextualize Du Bois as a global social theorist of modernity. The piece concludes with Michael Burawoy’s provocation for a *restructuring* of the Du Boisian tradition, which not only considers the context of Du Bois’s canonization, but which also provides us with a warning about the possible uncritical lionization of Du Bois.

2 | Aldon Morris—Du Bois the Scholar Denied

The great sociologist and activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, was initially erased and marginalized from sociology because he was Black: a member of a race considered by whites to be inferior. But that is not the end of the story; Du Bois was also denied as a scholar and sociologist because he developed radical ideas advocating race, class, and gender equality and a world free of violence and weapons of mass destruction.

The Du Boisian scholar, Walter Allen, became an assistant sociology professor at the University of North Carolina in 1975. Throughout Allen’s educational career, W. E. B. Du Bois’s scholarship and activism served as his role model. Allen informed his senior white colleague, Everett K. Wilson, that he planned to write a research paper on Du Bois. Allen valued Wilson’s advice, given his professional stature an editorship of a major sociology journal. Wilson counseled Allen not to pursue Du Bois because he was not a sociologist. Allen (2024, 7) recalls “[Wilson] dismissed the great sociologist and scholar W. E. B. DuBois as a mere journalist and polemicist.” Indeed, to even consider Du Bois as a sociologist in the 1970s threatened one’s career. Thus, Allen (2024, 7) complained “I gained an enemy when I publicly challenged

[Wilson's] view and presented voluminous evidence proving him wrong."

The belief Du Bois was not an important sociologist was widespread. My dissertation chair and mentor, Lewis Coser, who was an influential sociological theorist, explained to me that Du Bois was not a major sociologist because "masters of sociological thought are those rare scholars who build theoretical systems, and Du Bois did not build such a system" (Morris 2015, xv). Wilson and Coser's views were not isolated. For 71 years after the American Sociological Association (ASA) was founded, none of its presidents mentioned Du Bois in their presidential address. Even after Du Bois was finally cited by president Alfred McClung Lee (1976), Du Bois was not mentioned again for a quarter century. Moreover, the first three Black ASA presidents—E. Franklin Frazier 1948, William J. Wilson, 1990, and Troy Duster, 2006—did not cite Du Bois in their addresses, despite discussing issues Du Bois analyzed and illuminated.

As I wrote in *The Scholar Denied*, "white scholars of the second half of the twentieth century did not purposely ignore Du Bois; rather, thanks to the marginalization of Du Bois by the white founders of sociology, they were ignorant of his work" (Morris 2015, xv). Given this ignorance, they failed to encourage work on Du Bois even when others desired to pursue it. This meant younger generations of sociologists, especially Black sociologists, would be penalized for producing work on Du Bois because there was no professional currency in researching and citing Du Bois's enormous contributions to sociology. Thus, Du Bois had to be "discovered" and his work accorded scholarly legitimation before Du Boisian sociology could flourish.

2.1 | Discovery and Legitimation of Du Bois's Sociological Contribution

Tumultuous times in society are good for sociology. They challenge conventional wisdom and reveal glaring gaps in knowledge. The 1950s–1970s Civil Rights and Black Power movements revealed the utter failure of social science to anticipate or interpret those movements. Sociology proved near useless regarding these racial dynamics because it mirrored societal racism, claiming Black people were hopelessly inferior. So-called sociological knowledge denied Black agency, creativity, and the ability of Black people to turn the social order upside down in pursuit of change. Yet, that is exactly what happened as protests and racial crises rocked the nation.

The Black revolt revealed society and sociology were riddled with racial inequalities. The first challenge emerged when Black sociologists rebelled against the ASA due to sociology's inability to explain explosive racial confrontations, and its blatant lack of adequate Black participation in the Association. The insurgents organized the Black Caucus, which created the Minority Fellowship program, the Du Bois-Frazier-Johnson award honoring pioneering Black sociologists, and agitated for large scale Black participation throughout ASA.

To address issues raised by the Black revolt, a national conference of Black sociologists was organized in 1972 at the

University of Chicago which attracted over a hundred Black sociologists. A sophisticated, informative volume—*Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Blackwell and Janowitz 1974)—emerged from the conference. It devoted extensive scholarly attention to Du Bois, detailing his role as a pioneering sociologist, and highlighted his voluminous sociological works.

Rather than triggering a tsunami of Du Boisian sociology, the volume encountered muted silence, producing a few flickers but no flames. Yet, the revolt within and without the academy sounded the alarm that insofar as race was concerned sociology was found lacking. It championed an erroneous view of Blacks as a helpless people in need of white guidance. The rejection of this sociological myth by Black sociologists was captured in Joyce Ladner's (1973) edited book provocatively titled *The Death of White Sociology*. The argument that a "Black deficient sociology" was outdated and sociologically dangerous gained traction; the time for a bottom-up sociology of the oppressed revealing subaltern agency was moving up on the scholarly agenda. Decades leading to the 21st century witnessed the trickling of works on Du Bois in numerous academic disciplines, including David L. Lewis's (1993, 2001) two Pulitzer Prize biographies on Du Bois. Yet, none of these works produced a Du Boisian sociology.

A pivotal breakthrough occurred in 2005–2006 when a small group of sociologists (myself, Michael Schwartz, Dan Clawson, Mary Pattillo, Walter Allen, Cedric Herring, and Howard Winant) proposed that the ASA's top award—The Distinguished Career of Scholarship Award—be named in honor of Du Bois. ASA's Awards Committee dismissed this proposal out of hand, arguing an award already existed that included Du Bois. The insurgents countered that Du Bois stood alone in sociological significance, and that he was a founder of American scientific sociology. They decided that this decision needed to be made by ASA's membership.

A proposal was developed that went to great length explaining Du Bois's sociological career to erase the tremendous ignorance among sociologists of Du Bois. The proposal was endorsed by 13 former ASA presidents and the last four recipients of the original award. ASA's membership voted in favor of the name change. Thus, the creation of the W. E. B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award constituted a major advance in legitimizing Du Bois's role as a pioneering sociologist deserving canonization. This effort was buttressed by the successful campaign of Tukufu Zuberi to have Du Bois appointed Honorary Emeritus Professor at the University of Pennsylvania in 2012, where Du Bois ([1899] 1967) had produced *The Philadelphia Negro* over a century ago, but refused a professorship.

2.2 | Conclusion: Du Boisian Sociology Triumphant

By the second decade of the 21st century, a Du Boisian social science has emerged generating numerous books and articles on Du Bois's scholarship and activism. Recent foundational texts chipping away Du Boisian ignorance in the profession boosted

this explosion. These include Earl Wright's articles in the 2000s (see Wright 2002; Wright and Calhoun 2006) and his 2016 book, *The First American School of Sociology* (Wright 2016), my own *The Scholar Denied* (Morris 2015), José Itzigsohn and Karida Brown's (2020) *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, and Marcus Hunter's *Black Citymakers* (2013a) and his article *A Bridge Over Troubled Urban Waters* (Hunter 2013b).

Scholars in numerous subfields: economic, environmental, and global sociology; gender, race, and ethnic studies: sociologies of methodology, demography, historical and comparative studies, and medical sociology; political and criminological sociology, and symbolic interaction, and sociological theory are exploring the pioneering contributions Du Bois have made in these areas. Handbooks on Du Bois are appearing. Thus, *The Oxford Handbook of W. E. B. Du Bois* (forthcoming) edited by Aldon Morris, Michael Schwartz, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, Walter Allen, Marcus Anthony Hunter, Karida Brown, and Dan Green is being published in 2024. It contains 49 chapters covering Du Bois's life, scholarship, and activism. International journals are publishing symposiums on Du Bois's work. Numerous countries are sponsoring lectures and conferences on Du Bois. Social science syllabi have begun to routinely include works by Du Bois.

The Du Boisian revolution is happening now because the slow intellectual legitimization process is approaching maturity. The Black revolt in the second half of the twentieth century remains the political and intellectual foundation on which the Du Boisian revolution has been built. The revolt propelled relatively large numbers of scholars of color and progressive scholars into the academy receptive to Du Boisian sociology, especially given now they can build successful scholarly careers by uncovering and extending scholarship and activism within the sociological orientation established by Du Bois.

Moreover, these younger generations of scholars are embracing Du Bois's scholarship because it is politically and publicly engaging, documents the history-making agency of the oppressed, is international in scope, theoretically rich, methodologically rigorous, and promises to fertilize sociological imaginations useful to reshaping the troubling contemporary world. This Du Boisian renaissance is young, but all indications are that it will grow and become self-sustaining given the abilities, passions, scholarly commitment, and passion of its current progenitors.

3 | José Itzigsohn—Chance and Du Boisian Sociology

Sociology is going through a Du Boisian moment, marked by a recognition of Du Bois as one of the founders of the discipline, a growing number of scholars that look at Du Bois's work for new questions and new methods, and a reflection on Du Boisian sociology as a path not taken. This Du Boisian moment is long in the making. Throughout the last decades scholars have been making claims about the relevance of Du Bois for different areas of the discipline, such as the study of Black communities (Green and Driver 1978; Hunter 2015) urban and community studies

(Anderson 2000; Hunter 2013a; Loughran 2015; Zuberi 2004); historical sociology (Itzigsohn 2013); the study of empire and the global color line (Quisumbing King 2019); and sociological theory (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015; Zuckerman 2004). For reasons of space this is not an exhaustive list, but it gives an idea of the buildup of the Du Boisian moment.

The key event in the consolidation of the Du Boisian moment, however, was the publication of Aldon Morris' (2015) *The Scholar Denied*. This book made a clear and compelling case that Du Bois was the father of American scientific empirical sociology and that his work has been ignored by the discipline. Morris was not the only one to argue this. Scholars such as Reiland Rabaka (2010) and Earl Wright (2016) have made similar arguments, but it was *The Scholar Denied* that forced sociology to change its discourse about Du Bois. Morris had already started to put Du Bois at the center of the discipline when, in 2004, he led the initiative to name the American Sociological Association life achievement award the W. E. B Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award.

In the last three or 4 years there has been an exponential growth in papers that build on Du Boisian arguments. Again, for reasons of space, I cannot cite them here, but suffice it to say that there is a growing and exciting Du Boisian scholarship. Karida Brown and I contributed to this Du Boisian moment by providing a holistic analysis of Du Bois's sociology, arguing that he was not only a founder of empirical sociology but that he also developed a unique theoretical and methodological approach, and by suggesting pillars for the development of a contemporary Du Boisian sociology (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015, 2020).

In perhaps simplistic terms, this Du Boisian moment is the result of the decision of a number of sociologists to make the case that Du Bois work is foundational for the discipline and relevant for rethinking the discipline in the present. This group of people worked mostly independently of each other, knowing what others have written but not exchanging ideas or coordinating plans. This was my experience while working with Karida Brown on our book, and based on conversations with different people, it is my sense that it was not only us that worked in isolation. After the publication of *The Scholar Denied* (Morris 2015), a broad conversation developed on Du Bois's and Du Boisian sociology. Also, a Du Boisian Scholar Network was created that held two vibrant convenings, but unfortunately did not last. In order to understand this Du Boisian moment, we need to rely, again, on Du Bois. In *Sociology Hesitant* Du Bois ([1905] 2015, 276) asks the discipline to pose "the Hypothesis of Law and the Assumption of Chance," or in contemporary words, to examine historical conjunctures to establish empirically to what extent social action is affected by structures and to what extent it is the product of the historically situated undetermined decisions of social actors.

In terms of structural causes, the most important one is the consequences of the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These movements demanded that the academy opens its doors to racialized communities and to the questions and perspectives that they bring. They also demanded the academy's accountability to racialized communities. This last demand did not

come to pass, the academy incorporated the movements demands into its own structures. The outcome was a more diverse student body and the emergence of new fields such as Ethnic Studies, African American Studies, Latinx Studies and Native American Studies. The effect was felt also in Sociology. The growing number of students and faculty from racialized groups brought new questions and issues to a discipline that for decades has avoided dealing with the centrality of racism and colonialism in modernity. A more diversified academy also had a large number of people willing to listen to a challenge to established disciplinary practices.

But these changes did not necessarily have to lead to the rise of a Du Boisian moment. Du Bois may seem a logical choice given that he was the founder of empirical sociology in the United States and also a social theorist. But in the 1960s, there was a vindication of Black Sociology without a call for a Du Boisian sociology (Ladner 1973; Blackwell and Janowitz 1974). Moreover, there are other critical approaches in the discipline, such as racial formation (Winant 2002) postcolonial sociology (Go 2016), and Black feminist sociology (Collins 2008; Luna and Pirtle 2021) that build on Du Bois's work to different extents without centering it. The fact that a group of sociologists chose, independently from each other, to recuperate the work of Du Bois and try build a new sociology around it is in part the work of chance.

Moreover, the shape of the Du Boisian challenge will be in part the result of chance. I encountered Du Bois by chance and read him through the lens of my previous readings of Franz Fanon and C. L. R. James. The Du Bois that emerges from these readings is an anticolonial Du Bois that theorizes racial and colonial capitalism, roots sociological analysis in history, and builds a methodology based on second sight. This is not the only, or the most common, reading of Du Bois in sociology. But it is one that is inspiring some young scholars to develop a decolonial or postcolonial Du Boisian sociology. What will be the fate of this approach is undetermined. It will be the result of the extent of its appeal to young scholars and the reaction of the discipline to it. In other words, it will be the result of debates over sociological perspectives and knowledge production, and of more prosaic issues like job placements and promotions. In other words, the Du Boisian challenge takes place within the constraining structures of the academy, but its success and its content are going to be the contingent result of chance.

4 | Ali Meghji—Canonizing Du Bois: An Historical Perspective

Attempts to canonize W.E.B Du Bois as a pioneer of social science are not new. In my archival work on the Du Boisian tradition (see Meghji 2024a), a recurrent theme I stumbled across was that 20th century Black sociologists—such as Allison Davis, Franklin Frazier, and St Clair Drake—all viewed Du Bois as, to quote Allison Davis (n.d., 1), “the best empirical American sociologist of his time.”

While Aldon Morris' (2015) provocation of Du Bois being a “scholar denied” galvanized international social scientists to

excavate the Du Boisian tradition, similar attempts of such a Du Boisian excavation had already been attempted decades previous. In 1969, only six years after Du Bois's death, Elliott Rudwick (1969, 303) published a paper describing Du Bois as “a forgotten Black sociologist.” Here, Rudwick (1969, 304) noted the paradox whereby Du Bois was at once part of the mainstream *and* periphery of American sociology, commenting:

Ironically, Du Bois, who by training and research orientation toward both empiricism and reform was part of the mainstream of American sociology as the discipline was evolving at the turn of the century, found himself relegated to the periphery of his profession.

Plenty of monographs and conferences then followed Du Bois's death, attempting to (re)value Du Bois and put him in his rightful place as a pioneer of sociology. Texts like Joyce Ladner's (1973) *The Death of White Sociology*, and James Blackwell and Morris Janowitz's (1974) *Black Sociologists: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* both sought to put Du Bois on American sociology's agenda; indeed *Black Sociologists* was itself based on a conference held in 1972 of the same title. At this conference, Francis Broderick (1972, 1) presented a paper titled *Du Bois a late historical view*, and he opened this paper by declaring “Du Bois' significance in American development does not now have the recognition it merits. Time will redress the balance. Now is not a bad moment to renew the process of redress by trying again to understand him” Commemorating Du Bois in 1964 at Roosevelt University, St Clair Drake ([1964] 1986, 111) thus declared of Du Bois that “whatever he might be, had had such an impact upon American history that he could not be ignored.”

This is all to say that prior to Morris' (2015) text, there was already a language of Du Bois being a “scholar denied,” and there were already efforts to redress this exclusion. Nevertheless, prior to Morris' book, there is a sense that Du Bois often appeared in a “now you see me, now you don't” sort of fashion. Just as Michael Burawoy (2005) mentioned Du Bois as a prototypical public sociologist in this ASA presidential address, a few years later Patricia Hill Collins (2010) also referred to Du Bois in her ASA presidential address, highlighting how Du Bois was an invaluable theorist of community and democracy. Concurrently to these ASA addresses, scholars such as Earl Wright (2002) were highlighting Du Bois's co-founding of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, and consequently his role in founding empirical sociology. Outside of sociology, figures like Cedric Robinson (1983) were writing Du Bois into the Black radical tradition, while British intellectuals such as Paul Gilroy (1993) were systematically engaging with the Du Boisian notion of double consciousness.

So why has there been a proliferation of scholarship on Du Bois in the past decade, despite the fact that the attempts to canonize him stretch back far longer than recent memory? The co-contributors to this piece have their own two cents on this matter, and I certainly do not disagree with them. From my perspective, and speaking from my research interests in post-colonial sociology, I would highlight two germane (though not

exhaustive!) elements of Du Bois's scholarship that may have led to his greater inclusion into the sociological canon than in years previous: first his appeal to multiple subfields, and second his historical and transnational sensibility which speaks to directly to contemporary race scholars who are trying to reorient this subfield.

First, a straightforward point: Du Bois speaks to multiple sociological subfields, stretching across different empirically, conceptually, and methodologically oriented communities. The historical sociologist, Nick Wilson, commented to me that this could potentially be a source of future trouble, as different sociological subfields try to impose their own vision of Du Bois as the correct interpretation—much like we have with other canonical figures such as Marx and Weber. In a similar vein of thought, Ben Carrington (2023) presciently overviewed his worries that American sociology was canonizing a version of Du Bois most consistent with the positivist tradition, leaving behind his methodological pluralism and radicalism. To Carrington (2023), Du Bois “the positivist American sociologist” was being canonized at the expense of the other, equally important “Du Bois-s.” While I agree with both Wilson and Carrington's reservations, it is still undeniable that the plethora of Du Bois-s makes him an easier figure to canonize, as he can be seen as an agenda-driver of multiple areas of sociological inquiry (i.e. perhaps the more sociological subfields you resonate with, the more likely it is that you become widely discussed in sociology at large). This is clearly evidenced in the way that the recent years have seen appraisals of Du Bois as (to name a few cases) a founder of empirical sociology (Wright 2016; Wright and Calhoun 2006), a prototypical public sociologist (Burawoy 2005), an historical sociologist of race and empire (Go 2016; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020), an urban ethnographer of Black life (Hunter and Robinson 2016; Wacquant 2008), an environmental sociologist (Bhardwaj 2023), and a pioneer of data visualizations (Battle-Baptiste 2018).

Simply put, therefore, it is through being canonized in multiple subfields that Du Bois has come to be canonized in sociology as a whole. Of course, this does not in itself answer *why* various subfields have turned to Du Bois, but it offers a thread to be followed up with empirical research. Indeed, I'll briefly engage with this area now, considering how Du Bois's critiques of race, empire, and colonialism offered a novel framework in the sociology of race in a context where many in the subfield were lamenting problems which Du Bois transcended.

A question I often ask myself is whether Du Bois's canonization would have been so explicit were it not for the ascendent “postcolonial” movement in American sociology's race scholarship. Many of us have written critiques of how much American race scholarship—including theories of racial formation, critical race theory, race relations theory, and systemic racism theory—have been marred by issues of methodological nationalism (see Meghji 2023). Indeed, in the inaugural issue of the ASA journal *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, Julian Go (2018) consequently debated the *Postcolonial Possibilities for the Sociology of Race*, arguing that adopting a more historical approach in the sociology of race, which focused on temporal and transnational relations of empire, racialization, and racism, would only deepen the subfield's analytical capacity(ies). While

Go (2011) himself had already been making inroads in this regard, organizationally speaking much of this postcolonial sociology was curtailed to the comparative historical sociology, and global and transnational sections of the American Sociological Association. Go's (2018) provocation for a postcolonial sociology of race, therefore, was a call *explicitly* for race scholars to engage seriously with the empirical realities of empire, colonialism, and decolonization. It just so happens, that Du Bois had also developed such a research program in his analysis of the global colorline.

As many will know, D. B. Du Bois (1906) contended that the colorline “belts the world.” What is not as regularly discussed is the fact that Du Bois (1958) claimed he became more aware of the global nature of this color line through engaging with anticolonial communities at events such as the 1911 Universal Race Congress, and the various Pan-African congresses. In this context, Du Bois was interested in the *transnational* connections and circulations of racialized practices, meanings, and exploitation which led him to a fundamentally *relational* understanding of the global color line. Engaging with Indian anti-colonialism in the early 20th century, for instance, Du Bois was committed to the view that “the same color line that runs through Mississippi, Harlem, and Chicago runs through places like Bombay and Johannesburg” (quoted in Desai 2020, 144), and that the conditions of Black Americans was thus *related* to the conditions of colonial subjects in India and the Union of South Africa.

Indeed, Du Bois's relational analysis of the color line is clearly evidenced even in his works which were explicitly focused on race in America. In his *Black Reconstruction* ([1935] 2014), for instance, Du Bois emphasizes the role that 19th century Southern labor had not only to American exports, but consequently to the global economy more broadly—he thus tells us a story of the transnational commercial interests behind racial exploitation in the geography of the US South. While Aldon Morris (2015, 48) claims that “Du Bois sought to explicate the human condition by interrogating the color line in America and globally,” we can go even a step further: Du Bois did not just analyze the colorline in America *and* globally, but understood the colorline's expression in America is itself part of a global set of relations. No wonder, therefore, that Du Bois ([1899] 1967, 386, 387) concludes his most famous ethnographic study—*The Philadelphia Negro*—with a *global* statement reflecting on the racial hierarchy:

We grant full citizenship in the World Commonwealth to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (whatever that may mean), the Teuton and the Latin; then with just a shade of reluctance we extend it to the Celt and Slav. We half deny it to the yellow races of Asia, admit the brown Indians to an ante-room only on the strength of an undeniable past; but with the Negroes of Africa we come to a full stop, and in its heart the civilized world with one accord denies that these come within the pale of nineteenth-century Humanity.

Even Du Bois's most well-known micro-ethnographic study, therefore, included some degree of a transnational

understanding of race. It is my contention that Du Bois's canonization—especially in American sociology—comes at precisely the same time that many American race scholars are trying to sculpt out a specific *post/anticolonial* sociology of race which connects to the Du Boisian tradition (see Hammer and Park 2021; Quisumbing King and White 2021). While it is a slight “chicken or egg” situation in discussing whether the Du Boisian revolution fueled the transnational turn in race scholarship or vice versa, I think it would be prudent to say that both of these movements have supported each other (though not all postcolonial sociologists of race are Du Boisian, and not all Du Boisians are postcolonial sociologists of race).

In sum, my inclination is that while there are many factors to consider in this ongoing Du Boisian revolution, it is important to note how the increasing engagement with Du Bois is complementarily coupled with a series of subfields reflexively looking to rethink their central principles and analytical foci. The sociology of race offers an interesting case study in this context, where the subfield's search for more historical and transnational approaches to racism and empire have coincided hand-in-hand with the Du Boisian revolution in sociology at large.

5 | Fatma Müge Göçek—W. E. B. Du Bois: Contextualized in Modernity

In responding to the question of why there is a Du Boisian revolution now, scholars often contextualize Du Bois in American society's past and present. They analyze his academic trajectory within the United States in the past to convey how the mainstream sociology establishment initially marginalized and excluded Du Bois despite his stellar credentials that would have gotten any white scholar a tenure-track position at a top-tier university. This powerful portrayal of racism in US higher education that “denied” Du Bois's scholarship (Morris 2015) is then carried to the present. Scholars analyze the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and its reverberations to increasingly articulate the gradual formation of a Black public space in American society across time (Omi and Winant 2014). Du Bois's sociological insights are also read, reread, and re-interpreted. While some gradually locate him within the sociological canon alongside Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (Burawoy 2021b), others employ Du Bois to study the multiple aspects of race, such as within the context of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983), anti-coloniality and decolonization (Go 2016), and racialized modernity (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020).

I approach the question through a broader lens, contextualizing Du Bois not as a Black American sociologist within the United States, but rather as a global sociologist within the world at large, past and present.¹ This perspective is predicated on my academic standpoint as a comparative historical sociologist who received her initial training in Istanbul, Turkey located at the eastern borders of Europe. While many of our sociology professors were trained in the United States, the continued focus on Marx, Weber and Durkheim inherently normalized and naturalized European history that formed the empirical infrastructure not only of this sociological canon, but

also of how we all processed sociological knowledge. The conceptual boundaries of this European past and present were in turn located within the concept of modernity, referring to societies “built on the principles of individual freedom and instrumental mastery [that] emerged in Western Europe and North America from the late eighteenth century onwards” (Wagner 2020, 143). Such freedom and mastery have been interpreted along other parameters, in terms of the intersection over time of state/politics/democracy/nationalism on the one side and civil society/economy/reason/capitalism on the other, critically articulating different entangled phases of modernity over time and across space from its Western European origins to its current impending demise both in the West and the rest (G. K. Bhambra 2007).

In their recent work, G. Bhambra and Holmwood analyze (2021) the spread of modernity from the Western European metropole to the colonies as a “settler colonial project” whereby 60 million Europeans settled in the Americas, including the American colony. The authors trace the knowledge construction process of (Western) social theory through Hobbes, Locke, Hegel leading to Marx, Weber and Durkheim, but also include Du Bois among these white founding fathers. While some scholars address the recent ontological and epistemological inadequacies of this model of modernity by studying resistance to modernity outside the West (Connell 2007; Alatas and Sitra 2017), still others examine sites of resistance within the West, especially in relation to not only the concept of class as Marx formulated, but also race (G. K. Bhambra 2007; Gilroy 1993; Robinson 1983). Indeed, race emerges as a very significant parameter in the spread of modernity, a parameter frequently discussed by Du Bois throughout his long life (1868–1963).

6 | Michael Burawoy—Du Bois: From Discovery and Recovery to Reconstruction

During my four years in Zambia (1968–1972), conducting research and studying for my MA in sociology, I do not recall reading anything by W.E.B. Du Bois, despite his fame as a Pan-Africanist. Subsequently, when I entered the University of Chicago for my PhD in sociology in 1972, I took William Julius Wilson's course on “theoretical issues in race relations.” The syllabus, full of radical scholars of the time, made no mention of Du Bois. Nor was Du Bois mentioned in Wilson's classic *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978) at the heart of which was the historical relationship between race and class, the focus of so much of Du Bois's voluminous scholarship. This is not a criticism of Bill Wilson. As he would be the first to acknowledge, Du Bois had simply not arrived, reflecting sociology's inherited conservatism.

In this short essay I follow three phases of Du Bois's restoration within sociology: *discovery*, when Du Bois's brilliance first emerges from the dross in which he had been buried; *recovery*, when further digging restores the genius behind the many lives he led; and finally *reconstruction*, when confronting his flaws we redesign him for the present, with reverberations for sociology at large.

6.1 | From Discovery to Recovery

There had been critical reviews of Du Bois in the 1950s and 1960s designed to finally bury, rather than discover his work. Historians and Black Scholars had been there before, but David Levering Lewis's (1993, 2001) two volume Pulitzer Prize winning biography brought Du Bois to the wider public. Sociology could no longer deny just what an extraordinary ancestor he was. By 2004 Du Bois was front and center at the meeting of the American Sociological Association—the focus of a standing room only plenary, with an audience mesmerized by two non-sociologists (Gerald Horne, Manning Marable) and two sociologists (Patricia Hill Collins and Aldon Morris). You could have heard a pin drop.

Sociologists had finally *discovered* Du Bois but they still had not *recovered* him let alone *reconstructed* him. Aldon Morris took us into recovery with his treatise, *The Scholar Denied* (2015), that revealed Du Bois as the unrecognized founder of US sociology. In his detailed exposition, Morris shows how Du Bois suffered racist exclusion from positions of influence—positions his education and scholarship, including being the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard and almost a second doctorate from the University of Berlin, should have commanded. Desperately seeking to escape Wilberforce University, the only job he could find on his return from Germany in 1895, Du Bois accepted a lowly research position at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was tasked with conducting a community study of the Black population in the 7th ward of Philadelphia. This would become *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1967), now regarded as a classic of urban sociology.

In 1897, after completing his epic fieldwork in Philadelphia, he moved to a Historically Black University, Atlanta University, where for the next 13 years he orchestrated a series of collaborative monographs on various aspects of African American life. Bereft of resources, Du Bois worked with his colleagues, students and community leaders as volunteers, producing a novel type of grounded research. As Morris (2015) underscores, these case studies of the Atlanta School predated those of the Chicago School by 20 years.

In highlighting Du Bois's early sociology, Morris was well on the way to *recovering* Du Bois, but he did much more. Morris's intervention led to talks and publications across the world. Elected President of the American Sociological Association he organized exciting virtual meetings in 2021 that showcased Du Bois and allied thinkers. Aided by an editorial committee of fellow Du Boisians, he assembled a set of 50 original commentaries on Du Bois's life and work for *The Oxford Handbook of W.E.B. Du Bois* (forthcoming).

We can fairly say that no sociologist has done more than Morris to recover Du Bois's stature as scholar, scientist, activist, socialist and public intellectual; but he hasn't done this alone. Earl Wright (2016) made similar claims about Du Bois's role in the founding of US sociology. At the same time, at Brown University with his colleagues Anthony Bogues, Padget Henry, Patrick Heller, Nitsan Chorev and others, José Itzigsohn cultivated a cadre of enterprising young sociologists whose ideas would soon

spread across the discipline. With his former student Karida Brown, Itzigsohn co-authored a celebratory overview, *The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois* (2020), while others explored CLR James, Stuart Hall, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Winter, and Anna Julia Cooper. A network of Du Boisian sociologists was created through the various conferences and workshops Itzigsohn organized.

The upsurge of interest in Du Bois drew strength from other tendencies within US sociology, such as Julian Go's postcolonial theory and George Steinmetz's studies of empire. Equally crucial to the project of recovery were journals advancing Du Boisian scholarship, like the *Du Bois Review* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* and debates like the one in the pages of *Catalyst* between Jeff Goodwin (2023a, 2023b) and José Itzigsohn (2023). Such confrontations compel recognition of the multiple faces of Du Bois and as such move us from recovery onto reconstruction.

The growing interest in Du Bois coincided with, and was promoted by, the resurgent publicity given to anti-Black police repression, color-blind racism and the rise of social movements, especially Black Lives Matter. The surge of white nationalism encouraged by the rise of Donald Trump further fueled the conversation about race. Liberal newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, devoted greater space to race issues, and to the erosion of the gains of the civil rights movement. In a major departure from mainstream journalism, *The New York Times* promoted the 1619 Project of Nikole Hannah-Jones, which traced the history of the US to its original sin, slavery, the preservation of which, she argued, was a motivation behind the American Revolution. Together with such popular books as Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010) the liberal press created fertile soil for a positive reception of Du Bois within academia. This was in part a return to the radicalism of the 1970s, but now sociology was armed with the recovery of a scholar of its own, an icon of hope and despair. A new generation inspired by Du Bois led critical initiatives within the discipline like the ASA's historic endorsement of a Resolution for Justice in Palestine.

6.2 | Onwards to Reconstruction

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. While there has been successful discovery and recovery, what about the reconstruction necessary for Du Bois to transform sociology? Disciplines are conservative endeavors, likely to put up resistance to the adoption of a radical figure like Du Bois.

One place to look for change is teaching. Cody Melcher (2024) recently analyzed 764 sociology syllabi at the University of California, Berkeley over the period 2012 to 2023. He documents a steady rise since 2014 in the assignment of Du Bois, by 2023 overtaking Durkheim and Weber and nearly catching up with Marx. Equally interesting, over time there was an increasing adoption of the later, more radical Du Bois, especially *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois [1935] 2014). Leaving aside the question of the typicality of Berkeley, this suggests Du Bois is making significant inroads in the teaching of sociology. Indeed, in this period, Du Bois is the leading contender for canonization.

Melcher, however, does not distinguish between graduate and undergraduate courses. Resistance to a Du Boisian reconstruction is far more likely at the graduate level where future sociology faculty are being trained. There is open opposition among gatekeepers in the discipline, as manifested in the take-over of the journal *Theory and Society*—what had been sociology's flagship journal of critical theory—by those horrified by Du Boisian and kindred developments. Even more prevalent are efforts of cooptation, recognizing but simultaneously peripheralizing Du Bois within theory courses or simply constituting such courses as a smorgasbord of authors while leaving the canon untouched. Unequal or token inclusion is also secured through focusing only on Du Bois's early empiricist and reformist sociology like *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1967) and the Atlanta School, to the exclusion of the radicalism of John Brown ([1909] 1996), *Darkwater* ([1920] 1999), *Black Reconstruction* ([1935] 2014), *Dusk of Dawn* ([1940] 2002), *The World and Africa* ([1947] 2007), and *In Battle for Peace* ([1952] 2014). If race was key to forcing Du Bois out of sociology at the beginning of his career, in later years sociologists would find his Marxism intolerable.

There are other, disciplinary reasons why Du Bois's canonization will be more difficult than the canonization of Marx in the 1970s and 1980s. While the domination of structural functionalism in the 1950s and 1960s appeared to be stable, its totalizing ambitions made it vulnerable to assault. Being out of sync with the times, beginning in the 1960s, assured its collapse like a pack of cards. Today sociology is a plural discipline without a singular dominant framework. There is no attempt to reduce Marx, Weber and Durkheim to a convergent theoretical framework. We have become an anarcho-syndicalist organization rather than an aspiring communist party with a singular line. Dissenting voices are easily and harmlessly channeled into sections of the ASA and their multiplying journals. Our multi-nodal discipline can efficiently marginalize challenges.

No less significant an obstacle to reconstruction is the very nature of Du Bois's writings, which are dispersed among different genres and driven by a succession of political interventions. His “critical engagement” emanates from without, a project more radical and more transformative than “public sociology” that is a compensatory reaction to the hyper-professionalization of US sociology (Bezuidenhout, Mswana, and von Holdt 2022; Meghji 2024b). At the same time, a lifetime of political interventions does not, by itself, add up to a consistent body of social theory. Du Bois's conception of methodology—if we can call it that—was (to use his distinction) as much propaganda as science. We have to work hard on transforming his scholarly “propaganda” into a coherent theory or theories that illuminate the present and the future as well as the past.

Glorification of Du Bois has much to recommend it for discovery and recovery, but reconstructing sociology will remain limited so long as it does not engage the canonical troika of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. The canon after all is not an assemblage of fixed, independent classics, but a dynamic set of relations that demand the continual re-reading of those classics. Here we must recognize Du Bois's own evolution: the convergence with Durkheim in his early empiricism, starting with *The*

Philadelphia Negro ([1899] 1967) leading to The Atlanta School; the divergence between Weber's account of the origins, reproduction and future of capitalism and Du Bois's theory of imperialism that he developed during the 24 years as editor of *The Crisis*; and finally, Du Bois's brilliant reconstruction of Marx, starting with *Black Reconstruction in America* ([1935] 2014). If conducted seriously such dialogs could (re)ignite (or extinguish) the traditions created by Durkheim, Weber, and Marx and, at the same time, strengthen Du Bois as a social theorist (Burawoy 2021a, 2021b; Fields 2002; McAuley 2019). It is not a matter of domesticating Du Bois but turning our discipline into an exciting intellectual battleground that explicitly recognizes the multiple faces of Du Bois.

“Reconstruction” or “refuting the refutation” is how research programs grow (Lakatos 1978). Reconstruction requires us to search out anomalies and contradictions and then obsess about them, rebuilding our research frameworks to accommodate them. Great theorists have great contradictions and Du Bois is no exception: a limited paternalistic vision of decolonization in Africa that ignores the divergent interests among the colonized and varied trajectories for the postcolony; specifically his endorsement of African American colonization of Liberia after his visit there in 1923; a celebration of Indian Independence without recognizing caste, despite its centrality to his own account of the Southern US; a laudatory assessment of racial democracy in Brazil and Cuba, based on miscegenation, that overlooks the racial subjugation of former slaves; support for the Israeli state in its fight against the British mandate at the expense of Palestinians; a view of Nazi Germany through the lens of the potential rationalization of the economy; and adoption of the Marxist-Leninist ideology as the truth of the Soviet Union and China.

Du Boisians cannot sweep these blind spots under the carpet. Failure to confront them not only opens us to contemptuous dismissal but closes the path to scientific advance. We must try to understand how Du Bois came to these problematic conclusions—how he understood them and, indeed, sometimes reconsidered them, but we must also do so with a view to reconstructing his framework. We can celebrate Du Bois as an original global sociologist who understood the power of imperialism, while also recognizing how he discounted the significance of the subaltern—in sharp contrast to his own analysis of the US.

Just as we shouldn't limit ourselves to playing Du Bois off against the parochialism of Robert Park and the Chicago School, but instead put him into conversation with such expansive minds as Marx, Weber and Durkheim; so we need to bring Du Bois into conversation with anti-colonial scholars: CLR James, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, Stuart Hall, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Claudia Jones, etc. In so doing we can make him part of a shared project such as Black Marxism or the Black Radical tradition (Burawoy, forthcoming). Just because Du Bois thought of himself as an outlaw with an independent streak, just because he didn't seriously engage people of his own intellectual caliber, preferring polemics with Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, doesn't mean we have to follow suit, treating his writings as though he was the only sociologist left standing. Quite the opposite: the reconstruction of Du Bois will require both an

antagonistic dialog with the sociological canon and a complementary dialog with anti-colonial thinkers, and each of these dialogs will strengthen the other. Anyone familiar with the real process of decolonization, knows it doesn't happen tabula rasa.

Finally, there is the danger that Du Bois will push sociology into a parochial trap. Du Bois's inattention to the subaltern within subaltern countries may reflect his search for solutions to racism at home, his limited knowledge of lands he didn't visit, his faith in leaders of independence movements, or, perhaps most convincingly, his fixation on nationalist critiques of US imperialism. In so doing, however, he betrays an Americo-centric view of other countries by accepting the ideology of their dominant classes. Without entering into dialog with others, Du Boisians will lead US sociology down an isolationist path rather than its splendid reconstruction as part of global discipline (Burawoy 2023; Burawoy et al. 2023).

It should now be clear why I did not hear about Du Bois when I was in Africa. Even as a Pan-Africanist he didn't see the issues facing Africa in the way Africa saw them. We have to be careful not to reproduce the same narrowness and sense of superiority as we reconstruct Du Bois and through Du Bois as we reconstruct sociology. We must take the sociology of others seriously—both our own disciplinary past and other national sociologies—that is, if the Du Boisian reconstruction is to be progressive rather than regressive.

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Following the editor, the order of the authors is purely alphabetical.

Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ I am currently working on a lengthier, article-sized version of this project that I intend to eventually turn into a book.

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