

Du Bois: From Discovery and Recovery to Reconstruction

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During my four years in Zambia (1968-72), 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' 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' restoration within sociology: *discovery*, when Du Bois' 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.

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 and 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), now regarded as a classic of urban sociology.

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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 underscores, these case studies of the Atlanta School predated those of the Chicago School by 20 years.

In highlighting Du Bois' 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' stature as scholar, scientist, activist, socialist and public intellectual. But he hasn't done this alone. Earl Wright II (2018) made similar claims about Du Bois' 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 and 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.

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 (forthcoming) 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*. 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' early empiricist and reformist sociology like *The Philadelphia Negro* and the Atlanta School, to the exclusion of the radicalism of *John Brown* (1909), *Darkwater* (1920), *Black Reconstruction* (1935), *Dusk of Dawn* (1939), *The World and Africa* (1947), and *In Battle for Peace* (1952). 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' 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 American Sociological Association 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' 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, Mnwana, and von Holdt 2022; Meghji 2024). At the same time a lifetime of political interventions does not, by itself, add up to a consistent body of social theory. Du Bois' 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' own evolution: the convergence with Durkheim in his early empiricism, starting with *The Philadelphia Negro* leading to The Atlanta School; the divergence between Weber's account of the origins, reproduction and future of capitalism and Du Bois' theory of imperialism that he developed during the 24 years as editor of *The Crisis*; and finally, Du Bois' brilliant reconstruction of Marx, starting with *Black Reconstruction in America*. If conducted seriously such dialogues 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 and 2021b; Fields 2002; McCauley 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 dialogue with the sociological canon and a complementary dialogue with anti-colonial thinkers, and each of these dialogues 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' 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 dialogue 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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