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W. E. B. DU BOIS



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ON SOCIOLOGY  
AND THE  
BLACK  
COMMUNITY

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
DAN S. GREEN AND EDWIN D. DRIVER

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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

The purpose of this volume is to make available to sociologists and other interested scholars a wide selection of the sociological writings of W.E.B. Du Bois. Special effort was made to include contributions which are out of print and very difficult to obtain. The selections which are included demonstrate Du Bois' concentration on black Americans and black community life in the United States. This collection of Du Bois' sociological writings is also of interest since it highlights Du Bois as an early American sociologist.

Throughout a lengthy and active life, W.E.B. Du Bois excelled in numerous occupations. Important above all, however, was his initial and, to him, most significant occupation—sociologist. Du Bois embarked on a career as a sociologist prior to the turn of the century; his goal was to ameliorate the race problem in the United States through a careful, scientific, sociological analysis of black Americans.

From 1896 to 1910 Du Bois was an extremely productive sociologist. His credits include a major monograph on black urban life, numerous other studies, published and unpublished, on various aspects of black American life and culture. In 1897, following his research in Philadelphia, he joined the faculty at Atlanta University; his primary responsibilities were to teach sociology and to take charge of the newly created program of sociological studies on the American Negro. In 1910 he left Atlanta for a career as a journalist and propagandist. He was somewhat disheartened about abandoning his goal of ameliorating the race problem through scientific analysis but felt that he might be more effective toward this end in

*viii* PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

his new career. Most of Du Bois' sociological writings were done between 1896 and 1910, although as this collection of his sociological writings shows, they continued after he left the academic world. In this sense, W.E.B. Du Bois remained a sociologist throughout his life.

We are deeply appreciative to the Ford Foundation for supporting the research on W.E.B. Du Bois which led to this volume. We would also like to express our gratitude to the many libraries and librarians who were helpful in supplying us with Du Bois' writings and pertinent background material.

Credit is given to the original publisher of each of Du Bois' essays at the beginning of each chapter. We are grateful for their generous permission to reprint them in this volume.

DAN S. GREEN and EDWIN D. DRIVER

# Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i> by Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver	1
 I. THE TASKS OF SOCIOLOGY	 49
1. The Atlanta Conferences	53
2. The Laboratory in Sociology at Atlanta University	61
3. The Twelfth Census and the Negro Problems	65
4. The Study of the Negro Problems	70
5. The Negro Race in the United States of America	85
 II. COMMUNITY STUDIES	 113
6. The Philadelphia Negro	115
7. The Black North in 1901: New York	140
8. The Negroes of Dougherty County, Georgia	154
9. The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia	165
 III. BLACK CULTURE AND CREATIVITY	 197
10. The Negro American Family	199
11. The Religion of the American Negro	214
12. The Problem of Amusement	226
13. The Conservation of Races	238

vi CONTENTS

IV. CHANGING PATTERNS OF RACIAL RELATIONS	251
14. The Relations of the Negroes to the Whites in the South	253
15. The Social Evolution of the Black South	271
16. The Problem of the Twentieth Century Is the Problem of the Color Line	281
17. Prospect of a World without Race Conflict	290
<i>Notes</i>	303
<i>Selected Bibliography of W.E.B. Du Bois</i>	311
<i>Index</i>	317

# INTRODUCTION

## I

William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois engraved his name in the annals of American history during a lifetime that spanned ninety-five years, from shortly before the Emancipation Proclamation to the eve of the 1963 civil rights protest demonstration in Washington, D.C. During a life filled with creativity and controversy, Du Bois had a varied occupational history; he was a historian, editor, writer, educator, civil rights activist, propagandist, and sociologist. Known primarily for his propagandistic activities and leadership on behalf of his race, Du Bois began his career as an empirical sociologist committed to the sociological study of the condition and problems of black Americans.

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868, shortly after the legal emancipation of enslaved black Americans. He was the only child born to Alfred and Mary Burghardt Du Bois. He later, partly humorously, remarked that he was born "with a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, but thank God! no 'Anglo-Saxon.'" Although from a poor family, he recalled that even with his brown face and frizzled hair, he was accepted by his peers and was, at times, even a leader among the town gang of boys. His color did not seem to interfere with his early social life. Generally, his childhood was idyllic in the small New England community where the color line was not sharply drawn, and social class and town roots seemed to be more important than skin color. The youngster grew up adhering to the local Protestant, Yankee values; he later wrote that he was taught to cordially despise the poor Irish and South Germans who worked in the local mills.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

As he grew up, although still generally socially accepted, he began to realize that he was different from the other children. First, he was aware of an intellectual difference that allowed him to excel in his school work and to recite in a manner which he referred to as a "happy, almost taunting glibness." He also slowly began to become cognizant that some people considered his color a misfortune or even a crime. This realization brought "days of secret tears," but it also compelled him to try harder and to perform better.

His competitiveness and perseverance are indicative of the Yankee heritage with which he was thoroughly indoctrinated. He learned to guard his emotions, to be sparing in his daily greetings with others, and generally to be restrained in his social interaction. Most of his behavioral patterns were thoroughly New England. In retrospect Du Bois noted that, later on, Southern Negroes were troubled by his reticence and his reluctance to greet them casually and warmly on the streets. His aloofness and coldness has been noted by others, and he has been criticized for being unable to identify or appear comfortable with common men.<sup>1</sup> Though this aloofness was in part due to his New England social heritage, some was undoubtedly engendered by his race, and some by his unusually keen intellect. Du Bois was by no means a common man.

Will Du Bois, as he was known as a youth, was the only black student in his graduating high school class. He took a standard college preparatory course which he completed with high honors. One racial incident occurred during this time, when the students proudly exchanged visiting cards. A girl, a newcomer to the community, refused his card. It occurred to him that her refusal was based on his color.

By this time Du Bois had already demonstrated a unique talent for writing. He had written for the *New York Globe* and as a local agent had sent weekly letters to the *New York Age*, both black newspapers. He was also the Great Barrington correspondent for the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Republican*. Even at this early age, his writing frequently tended toward social criticism.

When Du Bois graduated from high school in 1884, he hoped to continue his education at Harvard. His mother died the same year, and without either financial resources or a relative who could

assume the costs of a college education, he could not then attend Harvard. However, his high school principal and several local clergymen were able to offer the talented graduate a scholarship to Fisk University, a school for black students which was affiliated with the Congregational church. Although disappointed that he was not going to Harvard, Du Bois was pleased to have the opportunity of continuing his education and also of interacting with blacks.

As a high school youth, he had taken his first trip away from the tranquility and seclusion of Great Barrington. He had been invited to visit his paternal grandfather, a boat steward in New Bedford. It was, he claimed later, his "greatest boyhood trip," and his "first great excursion into the world." On his return home, he stopped in Providence at the house of a friend of his grandmother's and had what he called "another stirring experience." He went to an annual picnic on Narragansett Bay attended by black people from three states; here he "viewed with astonishment" thousands of black people "of every hue and bearing." In open-mouthed astonishment, he saw "The whole gorgeous gamut of the American Negro world; the swaggering men, the beautiful girls, the laughter and gaiety, the unhampered self-expression. I was astonished and inspired. I apparently noted nothing of poverty or degradation, but only extraordinary beauty of skin-color and utter equality of mien, with absence so far as I could see of even the shadow of the line of race."<sup>2</sup>

## II

Du Bois left the sheltered tranquility of Great Barrington in 1885 for the "real world." With him he took his hardy Yankee morality, a flair for writing, a developing social consciousness, and an eager thirst for learning. In retrospect, he noted that his disappointment at not going to Harvard was partially balanced by the excitement of going South, where he could again meet blacks of his own age, education, and ambitions. In looking back, Du Bois wrote that he leapt into this world with enthusiasm and discovered a loyalty and allegiance to his race which took precedence over his nationality: "Henceforward I was a Negro."

As it turned out, this new world of racial prejudice, discrimina-

tion, and color consciousness was wholly unlike anything that Du Bois had ever experienced. He quickly learned the role of the black man in Tennessee. One day while he was walking through the streets of Nashville, a white woman suddenly came around a corner and brushed against him. He tipped his hat, and manifesting his customary politeness, said, "I beg your pardon, madam!" She adamantly responded: "How dare you speak to me, you impudent nigger!"

Du Bois found the Fisk curriculum excellent but limited. His education at Fisk is perhaps best described as a mixture of traditional classical training and liberal arts. He seems to have been highly regarded by his teachers, and he, in turn, returned the compliment, claiming that he had been inspired by them. He furthered his literary skills by editing the school paper. In that capacity he wrote perhaps his first statement on the race problem, "An Open Letter to the Southern People." Here he noted the arbitrary distinction made between black and white, and pointed out that while whites justified black disfranchisement on grounds of ignorance, little was done to provide blacks with equal opportunities in education. During summer vacations, he gained first-hand knowledge of the rural South by teaching in black country schools. Du Bois graduated from Fisk in 1888.

The yearning to attend Harvard continued while Du Bois was at Fisk. The opportunity occurred when Harvard decided to become more of a national institution by attempting to enroll qualified students from the South and West. The young scholar applied, feeling that his New England background, his race, and the fact that he was studying in the South would work in his favor. He was accepted with a scholarship and matriculated at Harvard in 1888 as a junior. Although he had already received a bachelor's degree, Harvard required him to enroll as an advanced undergraduate because of the supposed academic deficiencies of Fisk.

At Fisk he had learned about race and the two worlds of the South; in contrast, at Harvard he experienced the loneliness of a black man in a white university. As an undergraduate from 1888 to 1890, he took courses in the "hard sciences," social sciences, and philosophy. In 1890 he was awarded a second B.A. degree, with

honors in philosophy, and along with another black graduate, he gave the class oration. He could not, however, readily identify with the institution and did not consider himself a part of it. He sought only the "tutelage of teachers" and the use of the laboratory and library facilities. He later wrote, "I do not doubt that I was voted a somewhat selfish and self-centered 'grind' with a chip on my shoulder and a sharp tongue."<sup>3</sup> Commenting elsewhere, he said, "I was desperately afraid of not being wanted; of intruding without invitation; of appearing to desire the company of those who had no desire for me."<sup>4</sup> He insulated himself as far as possible in a completely colored world. He said that, while he was in Harvard, he was not part of Harvard.

Du Bois applied for a graduate fellowship at Harvard, writing in his application that he desired to obtain a Ph.D. in social science, "with a view to the ultimate application of its principles to the social and economic rise of the Negro people."<sup>5</sup> He received a stipend for the study of ethics in relation to jurisprudence or sociology. "From 1890 to 1892," he wrote "I was a fellow at Harvard University, studying in history and political science and what would have been sociology if Harvard . . . recognized such a field."<sup>6</sup> Thus Du Bois was taking his initial steps toward the new discipline of sociology, feeling that it was the science of social action. He commented that in his quest "for basic knowledge with which to help guide the American Negro I came to the study of sociology, by way of philosophy and history rather than by physics and biology. After hesitating between history and economics, I chose history."<sup>7</sup>

His first research effort was begun during his first year of graduate study in a history seminar taught by Albert Bushnell Hart, his advisor. He methodically checked the United States statutes, colonial and state laws, the *Congressional Record*, executive documents, and other relevant sources for information about the African slave trade. Upon Hart's suggestion, the suppression of the African slave trade later became his thesis topic. He presented the initial results of his research to the American Historical Association in 1891. Apparently his presentation was well-received; the *New York Independent* mentioned it as one of the best three papers presented.<sup>8</sup>

Harvard granted Du Bois a master's degree in 1891, and he was

reappointed a fellow for the following year. During the 1891-92 academic year, he spent most of his time working on his dissertation. Most of his graduate study was in history and political economy. One of the later courses is noteworthy since it was the only sociology course that Du Bois took. It was entitled "Principles of Sociology: Development of the Modern State and Its Social Functions."<sup>9</sup> The course was taught by Edward Cummings, who apparently did not greatly impress Du Bois, because while Du Bois mentions many of his Harvard mentors in his writings, he does not mention Cummings.

With two bachelor's degrees and a master's degree, and being well on his way toward his doctorate, Du Bois was, by any standard, a highly educated person. Even so, he wanted at least a year of "careful training" at a European university to properly complete his education. Harvard had already turned down a request for financial aid toward this goal, so he looked elsewhere. He was fortunate in receiving a grant from the Slater Fund, half gift-half loan, for a year's study at the University of Berlin, with the possibility of a renewal for a second year.

From 1892 to 1894, at Berlin, Du Bois studied economics, history, and sociology under many of the recognized scholars of the developing social sciences, and used his vacations to travel and observe extensively throughout Europe. In his first semester he sat in a seminar taught by the renowned Gustav Schmoller, who, probably more than any other teacher, influenced his career as a sociologist. Broderick has noted that "Schmoller . . . drew Du Bois away from history into a type of political economy which could easily be converted into sociology, and, at a more general level, encouraged him to a career devoted to scholarship."<sup>10</sup>

Schmoller's methodological approach favored the use of induction to accumulate historical and descriptive material. He saw the goal of social science as the systematic, causal explanation of social phenomena, and he believed that social scientific facts, based on careful, inductive analysis, could be used as a guide to formulate social policy. He has been called a conservative social reformer who was deeply involved with the social question, remaining open to any kind of reform that would bring about social justice.<sup>11</sup> Even though Schmoller was interested in social reform, he taught his young

American student the difference between scientific issues and moral issues. Du Bois quoted his mentor as having said in a seminar: "My school tries as far as possible to leave the *Sollen* [should be] for a later stage and study the *Geschehen* [is] as other sciences have done."<sup>12</sup>

Du Bois' early sociological studies, until around 1910, manifest in many details Schmoller's tutelage: an emphasis on empirical data collection and the use of the inductive method, the collection of facts as a basis for formulating social policy, an underlying interest in social justice, and an emphasis on a historical approach. Speaking of his later research in Philadelphia, Du Bois seemed to be echoing Schmoller: "We simply collect the facts: others may use them as they will."<sup>13</sup>

The youthful scholar celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday in Europe. In a diary entry on his birthday he wrote that he dedicated "himself as the Moses of his people." Wondering about his future career and how he might best serve his race, he wrote: "These are my plans; to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race. Or perhaps to raise a visible empire in Africa thro' England, France, or Germany . . . I wonder what will be the outcome? Who knows?"<sup>14</sup> There can be little doubt that his first two goals were fulfilled; and against insurmountable odds, he spent much of his life working toward the third goal of an independent Africa, which he was instrumental in helping to establish.

The European experience broadened Du Bois socially as well as intellectually. He noted that as a result of his contact with Europeans, he began to perceive the color issue in the United States more broadly: "I began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the political development of Europe as one. I began to unite my economics and politics; but I still assumed that in these groups of activities and forces, the political realm was dominant."<sup>15</sup>

Prior to Du Bois' stay in Europe, and with the exception of his childhood, social distance between blacks and whites had functioned to separate him from whites; the racial social distance of Nashville and Harvard had undoubtedly hardened his convictions toward whites. In Europe, however, he discovered that he was readily

accepted socially and that racial barriers were not what he had anticipated. He began to realize that not all whites were color conscious, and he began to feel "more human." Regarding his unencumbered social interaction with educated and mannered Europeans, he wrote:

I emerged from the extremes of my racial provincialism. I became more human; learned the place in life of 'Wine, Women, and Song'; I ceased to hate or suspect people simply because they belonged to one race or color; and above all I began to understand the real meaning of scientific research and the dim outline of methods of employing its technique and its results in the new social sciences for the settlement of Negro problems in America.<sup>16</sup>

Du Bois left the United States in 1892 as a Harvard-trained historian with a background in philosophy; two years later he returned as an empirically oriented sociologist ready to use his experience for the uplift of his people. Du Bois did not obtain his Ph.D. from Berlin, because the Slater Fund was unable to provide the monies needed to complete another year there. The outstanding quality of his course work and thesis is evidenced by Schmoller's petitioning the university to admit Du Bois to candidacy in just one-half of the minimum time (6 semesters) established by the university. The petition was not honored because such a precedent would have meant acting on several other but less exceptional students.<sup>17</sup> After his return and while teaching at Wilberforce, he was awarded a Ph.D. from Harvard from the Department of History and Government. His dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, was published as the first volume in the Harvard Historical Series.

During the nine years from 1885 to 1894, Du Bois had received his formal academic instruction. Much of his undergraduate instruction had emphasized science, and what he referred to as "the scientific attitude." He was fairly well-trained in mathematics, language, psychology, philosophy, and economics, and was well-trained in history.<sup>18</sup> His overall training in social science and his instruction in courses with a sociological orientation provided him with a relatively solid foundation in the developing discipline of sociology. His later

work would adequately demonstrate both his training and his sociological competence.

The young savant had discovered the value of education. He must have reflected upon how his education had shaped and influenced his opportunities and raised his status in a racist society. His essay "The Talented Tenth," which speaks of a certain selected few black youths receiving a college education so that they could lead the masses, is indicative of the value that he placed on a college education.<sup>19</sup>

### III

Although his education had taught him what he must do to alleviate the Negro problem, his immediate concern was to earn a living. He began a systematic writing campaign to find a teaching position: "I wrote to no White institution—I knew there were no openings there."<sup>20</sup> He finally received an offer to teach classics at Wilberforce University, a small, black, Methodist school in Ohio; he immediately accepted. There were four other offers, including one from Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute; he later speculated about the course his life might have taken had he accepted Washington's offer.

At Wilberforce, Du Bois taught Latin, Greek, German, and English. To his already busy teaching load he wanted to add a course in sociology, which he offered to teach on his own time; however, the administration did not see a need for such a course. This occurred in 1895, which means that if Du Bois had been allowed to teach the course, it would have been among the first sociology courses taught in the United States. The religious orientation of the school, the administration, and the fact that he was neither engaged in the teaching of social science nor pursuing any research made his position at Wilberforce less than satisfactory. His writings indicate that he became increasingly unhappy, and at age twenty-eight he was concerned about fulfilling his pledge to help his people through sociological research.

An unexpected opportunity arose in 1896 when he was offered a temporary appointment at the University of Pennsylvania as an

assistant instructor. There is some dispute regarding the title; Rudwick has claimed that the actual title designated by the provost was "Investigator of the Social Conditions of the Colored Race in This City."<sup>21</sup> Ordinarily, the matter of an academic label would be of little concern, but Du Bois later accused the university and the faculty of not wanting a "colored instructor"—the rank which he claimed the department head might have offered him on the basis of his academic background.<sup>22</sup> According to Du Bois, he was hired for only a year, was given no real academic standing, no office at the university, and no official recognition of any kind; there was no mention of his name in the university catalog, he had no contact with students, and very little contact with the faculty, including the sociology department.<sup>23</sup>

Du Bois claimed that Philadelphia was one of the worst governed of our nation's ill-governed cities and was going through the throes of a periodic mood of reform and, as a consequence, desired a study of the "cause" of the urban problems. A scientific investigation backed by the prestigious university would provide empirical support to the already formed opinion of most white Philadelphians that the "underlying cause was . . . the corrupt, semi-criminal vote of the Negro Seventh Ward."<sup>24</sup>

The young sociologist arrived in Philadelphia in 1896 to begin his first effort at sociological research. Performing the research as a participant observer, he wrote: "With my bride . . . , I settled in one room . . . over a cafeteria run by a College Settlement, in the worst part of the Seventh Ward. We lived there a year, in the midst of an atmosphere of dirt, drunkenness, poverty, and crime. Murder sat on our doorsteps, police were our government, and philanthropy dropped in with periodic advice."<sup>25</sup>

Du Bois' resulting social study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, is a 400-page monograph on the plight of black Americans in Philadelphia, based on a survey and demographic data, much of which was collected by the author during his stay. Du Bois undoubtedly realized the significance of the study; it was not only his first research endeavor, but it was also a study of a city that at that time had the largest Northern black community in the nation. The general aim of his study was