

The Rise of DuBoisian Studies in the American Academy: Implications for 21st Century Scholarship on Race

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Abstract

An intellectual development of great importance has taken place in the American university and the wider American intellectual arena at the turn of the twenty-first century. The life and work of the late scholar and civil rights activist W. E. B. DuBois has spawned an unprecedented body of academic scholarship. DuBois is viewed by many as perhaps the most important scholar of race and democracy in American history. Owing to the profound influence of his intellectual legacy as both a social scientist and a vocal advocate for black equality his work deserves to be fully recognized, debated, and utilized by American scholars, researchers, and activists interested in understanding racial inequality and advancing racial democracy via their work in American universities.

Introduction

An intellectual development of great importance has taken place in the American university over the last fifteen years or so regarding W. E. B. DuBois, one of the most important African-American scholars of the twentieth century. In essence, the meaning of the life and work of William Edward Burghardt DuBois has assumed its rightful place among the pantheon of American scholars who, in the best sense of the word, have been canonized in American academic and intellectual arenas. Moreover, the beginnings of an academic field that can be considered “DuBoisian Studies” have been ratified by some of the more renowned institutions of American letters. The most prominent examples of the arrival of DuBoisian studies as a legitimate field for American social sciences and humanities are indicated by the scholarly accolades that have been bestowed upon DuBois’s biographer David Levering Lewis, an African-American historian formerly of Rutgers University and currently at New York University. Following the 1993 publication of his first biographical volume, *W. E. B. DuBois: Biography of a Race*, Lewis was awarded three major academic awards: the Parkman and Bancroft Prizes in history, and the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Shortly after receiving the Pulitzer Prize, Lewis was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Lewis published a second volume, *W. E. B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century*, and received a second Pulitzer. These developments marked the first time in history that any scholar, let alone an African-American scholar, had ever won successive Pulitzers for a multi-volume biography. In 2003, social scientists and humanists around the globe hosted centennial celebrations of DuBois’s contribution to the literary canon, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which has been described as DuBois’s most enduring contribution to our understanding of African-American social, cultural, and political life. *The Souls of Black Folk*, the themes it addressed, and its author have risen to

unprecedented levels of prominence and mainstream acceptance that arguably have been achieved by no other African-American author, idea, or book.

It bears noting that the archiving of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers at Stanford University by historian Clayborne Carson led to a comprehensive, systematic development of the academic sub-field known as King Studies within the larger academic discipline of history and the interdisciplinary field of African-American studies. In similar fashion, David Levering Lewis's superb documentation of DuBois's life at the end of the Cold War, during which DuBois was made a pariah in many intellectual and political circles, also served to open the way for renewed attention as well as more sophisticated assessments of his life and work. After briefly assessing the role of academic canons, this selective review of DuBoisian literature tries to articulate the promising yet uncertain implications of these academic developments for research on issues of race, particularly by African-American scholars in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The reviewed literature is organized into three sections: biographies; special issue journals; and readers and edited volumes. The paper concludes with a description of the first major academic journal dedicated exclusively to social science research on race, *The DuBois Review*.

The Benefits and Pitfalls of Academic Canons

Eminent historian of academic disciplines Dorothy Ross (1991a), arguing against the canonical status of various texts and presumably individuals within the social sciences, made the following observation:

The critique of the literary canon is precisely an attack on its privileging of particular bodies and genres of work for legitimate study. The social sciences—both as mainstream orthodoxy and textual canon—can be defended and criticized on the same grounds (p.10).

As compelling as this claim may initially appear, it is rather telling that Ross, who wrote one of the *seminal* or *canonical* texts on the history of the American social sciences, fails to even mention the major contribution to American sociology of W. E. B. DuBois save in a passing comment in a chapter on “Scientism” within a segment devoted to Robert Park's contributions to what she terms “African American sociology” (Ross, 1991b, p. 439). Thus, it appears fair to argue that despite the shortcomings of academic canons and the pitfalls associated with them, such as cases wherein social science legitimizes racial hierarchy (Stanfield, 1985; Steinberg, 1999), having a black scholar of DuBois's magnitude canonized may indeed be worth the negatives that come with such status. In light of his overall scholarly *oeuvre* and his prodigious contributions to African-American social, political, and economic development, DuBois would deserve this position more than most. In fact, in their introduction to an edited volume on DuBois's sociological studies published in the late 1970s, Green and Driver (1978) noted that “the societal ideology comprising social Darwinism, manifest destiny, and racism was one of the dominant themes of United States sociology during DuBois's early era...” (p. 45). Therefore, despite his major contributions to the sociological literature on issues of race,

racism, and black culture, DuBois's work was simply not recognized. In addition, in *Biography of a Race*, Lewis (1993) observes that DuBois had to write what amounted to "two books in one" when writing *The Philadelphia Negro* in order to get his political and policy ideas across without having the book dismissed as a racial polemic.

Ultimately, the canonization of DuBois accords him the status that would ordinarily have been his had he not been a black scholar. Moreover, it provides a corpus of scholarship focused on African-American life and culture from which to build current and future research on race, racism, and the ongoing battle to achieve equality for African Americans in the United States.

Biographies

As already noted, the two-volume biography by David Levering Lewis is the most comprehensive and exhaustive study of DuBois's life (Lewis, 1993, 2000). More important, perhaps, is the fact that the Lewis biography represented not only an historically-based assessment of DuBois the man, but it was also an historically informed analysis of the social, political, and economic contributions of African Americans as a culturally-defined racial group during the twentieth century. By placing African Americans at the center rather than the periphery of American history, Lewis allows DuBois's life to serve as a metaphor for both the limitations and the potential of the American experiment with democracy as it is influenced and circumscribed by race.

DuBois has also been identified by biographers over the last decade as an important contributor to American political and philosophical thought (Reed, 1997; Zamir, 1995). For example, Reed (1997) argues that DuBois can be largely credited with the exemplification of the "unity" rather than the "contradictions" of scholarship and activism as vehicles for black political advancement within the racialized political and economic discourse of the twentieth century. In similar fashion, Zamir (1995) provided a more nuanced and textured assessment of the varied local, national, and international influences on DuBois's intellectual development as well as his understanding and articulation of the world-historical role of African and African-descended peoples.

Ultimately, the uniqueness of the recent biographies of DuBois can be located in the manner in which DuBois and his role as scholar and activist are juxtaposed against and evaluated in light of the major African-American, American, and International developments that have influenced the current state of racial oppression, race scholarship, and race politics in the post-industrial, global society. Few would find fault with DuBois's astute observation that "the problem of the twentieth century [wa]s the problem of the color line." Yet, as Holt (2000) has maintained, the problem of race has not declined in the twenty-first century, but rather the problem has evolved as the dynamics of race, place, and labor have shifted within the context of a global economy.

Special Issues of Scholarly Journals

There have been multiple scholarly articles published on DuBois in the last decade or so. An electronic search of the ProQuest research library using W. E. B. DuBois as the subject term yields nearly two hundred journal articles and reviews. The numbers increase exponentially when popular press vehicles such as magazines and news periodicals are included. Two recent special issues stand out as perhaps two of the best examples of scholarly criticism and assessment of DuBois in both the social sciences and the humanities. In *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Vol. 568, March 2000), edited by University of Pennsylvania sociologists Elijah Anderson and Tukufu Zuberi, articles by historians, sociologists, literary critics, political scientists, philosophers and others take as their shared point of departure DuBois's 1898 article "The Study of the Negro Problems" which was published in the same journal. Although several of the authors take DuBois as the central figure of the discussions, others such as William Julius Wilson, Michael Katz, and Patricia Hill Collins use the long arc of the social and political themes addressed by DuBois such as gender, race politics, political economy, and public policy as the conceptual approach to assessing his legacy. One of the most unique contributions in the volume is an essay by former chair of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, historian and legal scholar Mary Frances Berry (2000) who reminds readers that:

If we have any interest in being like DuBois, instead of just writing and talking about DuBois, we must understand that following his example means much more than being a public intellectual ... [but] It means a commitment to act for social change, to rub shoulders with activists on a regular basis, and to rejoice when attacked for being too radical (p. 109).

Therefore, according to Dr. Berry, DuBois's greatest legacy as an African-American scholar and activist is the fact that he took literally the ideal later embodied in advice given to black scholars by eminent historian Vincent Harding (1986) when describing the responsibilities of the black scholar to the black community:

The responsibility of black scholars is to return to the people a higher, deeper, cleaner version of the light that the people have given them, for they would have nothing to write about were it not for the people. And the question is, what can the scholar return to them other than gold-bordered certificates of their Ph.D.s? (p. 281-282).

Thus, we can observe the historical dialectic between the search for objective truth and the quest for racial equality that so often confronts African-American scholars.

In *Boundary 2* (July, Vol. 27, No. 3, Fall 2000) one of DuBois's major sociological essays, "Sociology Hesitant", is taken as the point of departure. In essence, the essay sets forth what might be termed a macro-philosophy of sociology. In it, DuBois chastises the founders of the fledgling discipline as unwilling, or "hesitant" as it were, in all of its positivistic pretenses to take seriously the position and case of black people in its

philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. As a result, the essay reads as a philosophical treatise, a methodological prescription, and a political agenda. The resulting critiques of DuBois's thought that appear in the issue each take some aspect of one or each of these dispositions as their conceptual lens for analysis.

Ultimately, DuBois, in his essay, points out the tentative nature of all theories and empirical findings drawn from the sociological enterprise. As such, several of the authors in the volume noted the almost contradictory nature of DuBois's evolving thought as a social scientist and as a humanist. The "coin of the realm" in this issue is Charles Lemert's in-depth discussion of DuBois's radical reinterpretation of the quarter century following the Civil War, namely *Black Reconstruction in America*. In this article, Lemert also discusses the relevance of DuBois, the historical figure, to the present. Although he briefly notes the negatives of "presentism", which Alridge (2003) defines as "the historian's mistake of over-reading the past into the present or forcing contemporary values and views onto the past" (p. 27), Lemert correctly points out that "DuBois is being brought into the present with a vengeance" (p. 221). Moreover, scholars are reminded that contemporary appropriation of the DuBoisian legacy such as his analysis of race, history, labor and economics, is worthy as a means of critiquing and potentially dismantling the legacy of inequality that is easily documented and catalogued along racial lines. Thus, even while presentism is frowned upon by historians, those scholars who have articulated how the implications of race have evolved over time and also pointed out the recurrence of its negative effects in the present are actually serving a noble function.

Notably, the most subtle yet enlightening claim in the volume is Kenneth Warren's observation that across the scope of DuBois's body of writings he was seeking a "social science of leadership." This view presents an interesting counterclaim to the notion of DuBois's elitism in that he discusses DuBois's notion of a vanguard of Black leadership, or leadership from the downtrodden, as an antidote to oligarchy. In other words, representatives of the disadvantaged are often the best qualified to prevent dominance by the rich and powerful. Ultimately, the scholars in this volume have presented a more humanistic assessment of DuBois the grand theorist, which is an excellent juxtaposition to the theories presented in the *Annals* issue.

Readers and Edited Volumes

Finally, this review briefly highlights the burgeoning crop of readers and edited volumes on DuBois's scholarship. The major compiled readers include a wide-ranging compilation, *W. E. B. DuBois: A Reader*, by David Levering Lewis (1995) and *The Oxford W. E. B. DuBois Reader* (Sundquist, 1996) which has an excellent introductory essay by editor Eric Sundquist. The edited volumes include *W. E. B. DuBois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics* (Bell, Grosholtz & Stewart, 1996); *W. E. B. DuBois, Race, and the City: The Philadelphia Negro and its Legacy* (Katz & Sugrue, 1998); *W. E. B. DuBois: An Encyclopedia* (Horne & Young, 2001), a reissued volume of *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960* (Aptheker, 2002) with a new introductory essay by Herbert Aptheker, editor of DuBois's correspondence; a new

volume entitled *DuBois on Education* (Provenzo, 2002) edited by Eugene Provenzo; and a collection of sociological essays compiled by Phil Zuckerman entitled *The Social Theory of W. E. B. DuBois* (Zuckerman, 2004).

Perhaps the best testament to the utility and popularity of these readers is that many of them have gone through several reprintings. Moreover, they have enabled a new generation of scholars, students, and laypersons to access the broad array of issues tackled by DuBois over the course of his seven-decade career. The edited volumes likewise have provided an outstanding lens onto the legacy of American racism, scholarship on racial inequality, and the prominent contributions of African-American culture within American society.

The central role played by DuBois in these areas of American scholarship as well as his prominent position as an African-American intellectual grounded in black culture and desirous of demonstrating the full humanity of peoples throughout the African Diaspora can be summed up in his essay “Phylon: Science or Propaganda?” wherein he stated that social science “can no longer find scientific refuge in detachment from its subject matter; nor just as surely, none in refusal to regard its own personal problems as subjects of scientific investigation” (DuBois, 1944, pp. 6-7).

Conclusions

The legacy of W.E.B. Dubois prompted sociologist Lawrence Bobo of Stanford University and political scientist Michael Dawson of the University of Chicago to found *The DuBois Review*, a social science journal dedicated to exploring issues of race. The very fact that a journal of this sort could be founded, edited, and largely contributed to by African-American scholars is a major testament to the DuBoisian brand of policy-relevant, solution-oriented, social science. The journal, begun in 2004, is committed to multidisciplinary analyses of race-related issues including empirical research, theoretical and conceptual analyses, and broad-based thought pieces and essays.

Taken together, the proliferation of DuBoisian scholarship in the last ten to fifteen years has laid the groundwork and set the course for a wider appreciation of the intellectual, cultural, and political importance of African-American scholarship, particularly when such scholarship is conceptualized, conducted, and deployed in the service of African-American social development. DuBois never shied away from these objectives, and it is safe to say that he would be proud to know that his life and work were not in vain.

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