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Du Bois’s contested legacy

Patricia Hill Collins
Department of Sociology, University of Maryland, College Park, USA

ABSTRACT
This review summarizes important contributions of The Scholar Denied. It also examines the significance of Du Bois’s exclusion from professional sociology, arguing that being a sociological outsider contributed to the integrity of Du Bois’s sociology.

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The Scholar Denied provides a provocative analysis of how sociology might have been different had William E. B. Du Bois been included during its formative decades. Rejecting the token inclusion of Du Bois on sociological syllabi, Morris recognizes that inserting Du Bois into the sociological canon without serious consideration of his work may do more harm than good. Instead, Morris makes the gutsy claim that, despite being excluded from the sociological canon for so long, Du Bois constitutes a canonical sociological figure.

Morris’s main argument is simple – racism kept Du Bois out of professional sociology, thus denying American sociology access to one of its most significant founders. Via painstaking research on American sociology’s formative decades and Du Bois’s actual and potential contributions to what emerged as professional sociology, Morris upends this trend towards token inclusion. Instead, Morris aims to grant Du Bois a seat at the table of sociology’s ‘founding fathers,’ arguing that Du Bois’s exclusion as a canonical sociological figure is not only evidence of racism but that his exclusion greatly impoverished sociology itself.

The Scholar Denied is at its strongest when this main argument is tied to a close read of the period of sociology’s emergence and of Du Bois’s role in it. Several aspects of his argument are especially compelling. First, Morris analyses Du Bois early social science research when Du Bois aspired to become
a professional sociologist. Juxtaposing Du Bois’s burgeoning scholarship alongside parallel developments within sociology enables Morris to introduce some core questions. If Du Bois’s research was so germane to early twentieth-century sociology, why was he denied recognition as a bona fide sociologist? Moreover, what has been the significance of this exclusion for sociology itself?

The Scholar Denied painstakingly marshals evidence to examine how the denial of Du Bois as a scholar hobbled modern sociology’s ability to build an objective social science. Morris shows how Du Bois presented an innovative analysis of race and racism, one that eschewed biologically deterministic models that so influenced eugenics thinking within the social sciences, in favour of what are now recognized as structural arguments about the causes of social inequality. Du Bois believed in the significance of empirical research for social theory and policy, rejecting uninformed speculation about biological causes of human social behaviour. African-Americans, in particular, bore the brunt of biased studies concerning an innate black inferiority. Du Bois’s sociology refuted these claims, instead viewing the social problems that plagued African-Americans as closely tied to structural phenomena. Morris argues that sociology gradually took up Du Bois’s commitment to evidence-based practice and theory building, but when it did, it rarely identified Du Bois as a seminal figure in their creation or development.

Second, Morris’s claim that Du Bois’s work was not merely derivative, but was original and perhaps itself influenced the work of other canonical figures constitutes another compelling argument in defence of Du Bois’s distinctive sociology. Why would sociology include Du Bois in the canon if, in fact, he was simply copying what others had said or done? As proof of Du Bois’s originality, the chapter on ‘The Du-Bois-Atlanta School of Sociology’ provides a detailed examination of Du Bois’s social science and how it differed from that produced inside the sociological mainstream. Morris presents evidence for his thesis that Du Bois was doing original empirical sociological research. As further proof of Du Bois’s originality, Morris’s chapter ‘Max Weber Meets Du Bois’ suggests that their common time in Berlin most likely fostered intellectual cross-fertilization. Morris speculates that, upon visiting the USA, Weber’s interest in Du Bois most likely reflected a familiarity with Du Bois gained in Berlin.

Third, Morris contends that institutional gatekeeping explains, in part, Du Bois’s exclusion from sociology and the denial of his scholarship. Morris presents a fascinating backstage look at how gatekeeping occurred during this important period of sociology’s formation. Du Bois faced a double form of gatekeeping – one involved in his famous debates with Booker T. Washington within US policy arenas about the future direction of African-American empowerment; and a more subtle form of gatekeeping advanced by Robert Park whose sociological paradigms for studying race and ethnicity
persisted for decades thereafter. These two institutional arenas may seem distinct, but in actuality, Washington and Park were closely aligned.

In the chapter ‘The Conservative Alliance of Washington and Park,’ Morris positions Robert Park as an important link both to the conservative racial politics of Booker T. Washington as well as to the conceptual frameworks of the Chicago School of Sociology. Washington and Park not only knew each other, but also they worked together. Robert Park’s involvement as a speechwriter for Booker T. Washington shaped the highly influential sociological framework of the cycle of contact, conflict, accommodation and assimilation. During sociology’s formative decades, this framework formed the bedrock of analyses of ethnicity and race and suggested that ethnic groups could reach the final stage of assimilation, whereas African-Americans were destined to languish in the hinterland of racial accommodation. While the direction of causality will never be known, it is clear that Park’s sociological views on race and ethnicity were more closely aligned with Washington’s views of racial accommodation than they were with Du Bois’s evidence-based theory development that underpinned his structural analyses of social problems.

This relationship between Washington and Park would remain an interesting historical footnote had Park’s ideas not had such a long-lasting impact within sociology. The innovation of The Scholar Denied lies in putting Du Bois in dialogue with Robert Park, via Washington’s influence on Park. By comparing the substance of Park’s sociology of race to that advanced by Du Bois, with Washington as the missing link between them, Morris makes a prima facie case for sociological missteps that is damning for Park, for the community of sociologists who uncritically endorsed Park’s race relations cycle, as well as for contemporary sociologists who persist in endorsing assimilation as the highest form of social integration.

Morris connects narratives of race within American sociology and race within US society by triangulating Du Bois, Park and Washington. He builds on existing work on race in sociology to examine how Park’s ties to Booker T. Washington seemingly influenced Park’s sociology. He can then connect this story within sociology to the broader narrative of the classic battle between Washington and Du Bois as two views of black empowerment. These debates between Washington and Du Bois are well known but are rarely framed in relation to their influence within sociology. Morris’s real contribution here lies in linking these two narratives.

Morris’s contribution lies in showing how a sociology that denied Du Bois his just due as a sociological master was impoverished by his absence. I sympathize with Morris’s project, share his outrage at Du Bois’s treatment, and think that The Scholar Denied is long overdue. Yet, I wonder whether Morris’s zealously proclaimed Du Bois as a canonical figure within sociology prematurely forecloses alternative interpretations of the sociological significance of Du Bois. In this spirit, I want to build some claims regarding
The Scholar Denied with an eye towards identifying alternative pathways for thinking about Du Bois as a sociologist and his potential relationship to sociology.

**Du Bois: a public intellectual or a public sociologist?**

I have no doubts that Du Bois could have handled the intellectual challenges of becoming a bona fide member of sociology at its inception. But I am less convinced that including Du Bois would have been inherently beneficial either to him or to sociology.

Du Bois may have scraped by for years at Atlanta University, but he was also spared the daily assaults of defending his anti-racism research agenda as part of his daily working environment. Would we have gotten the richness of his social science from his years at Atlanta or his staunch commitment to black people through his entire career had Du Bois experienced, in contemporary language, the ‘micro-aggressions’ that sap the spirit of so many talented junior scholars? It is an exhausting fight to swim upstream for so long, seeing the gaps and holes and distortions in Western knowledge, all the while recognizing that taking time to confront every slight or expression of downright ignorance will compromise the integrity of our own projects. Du Bois had an intellectual freedom and connection to the importance of his intellectual work that many of us have yet to experience.

Outside of sociology, Du Bois has long held stature across many venues, not just as a sociologist, or a public sociologist but also as a public intellectual. Du Bois is a towering figure within African-American social and political thought as well as the intellectual traditions a global black diaspora. Du Bois did great social science, yet he did so much more. The amazing virtuosity of Du Bois’s intellectual and political production raises him far above a mere canonical figure within sociology – Du Bois was a public intellectual. His historical, comparative and social science work both developed a theoretical a foundation between racism and capitalism in a US domestic and global context, and examined the effects of those structural forces on the everyday lives of African-Americans whose opportunities were circumscribed within these power relations. The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America (1896), a book based on his doctoral dissertation, makes clear his commitment to place scholarship in service to social justice. His Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880 (1935) examines how a virulent racism suppressed the democratic hopes of African-Americans after the Civil War. Du Bois was clearly a public intellectual because he had no choice. The question is whether he would have been able to be such a public intellectual within sociology.

Du Bois’s ability to work as an independent sociologist outside the politics of the professionalizing field shaped both his conception of sociology as well
as the kind of sociology he actually did. Ironically, perhaps Du Bois’s social science developed in the way that it did because he was outside professional sociology. He escaped the burdens of being a canonical figure or of contesting the canonical knowledge of sociological insiders.

Because Morris seemingly assumes that those who founded sociology held the reins so tightly that one had to wait until now for sociology’s grudging acceptance of Du Bois’s ideas, Morris may overestimate the influence of the solitary scholar on the collective process of knowledge production. Du Bois has been with us all along, not physically, but because his ideas did influence junior scholars. For example, his social science study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1897), had a special place in my ability to reject the claim that *The Polish Peasant* was the first empirical work within sociology and that the interpretive frame of ethnic assimilation its core paradigm. As a graduate student, when I encountered Lewis Coser’s *Masters of Sociological Thought* in my sociology classes sans Du Bois, I suspected that this ‘great masters of the canon’ framework was highly questionable if not just plain wrong. Reading Du Bois in the original was helpful to me, just as I suspect *The Scholar Denied* will be helpful to contemporary graduate students and junior faculty. Sociology was one of many fields where young intellectuals took Du Bois’s ideas with them into often-hostile environments that aimed to deny them membership.

Du Bois left us with a model of how to be both public sociologists and public intellectuals. Du Bois’s ideas travelled places where he was unable to go. This is not a new concept within African-American intellectual and political thought. This notion of preparing African-Americans to do battle within hostile white environments means equipping subsequent generations with tools of critical analysis. We did not have to wait 100 years for Du Bois’s ideas to enter sociology. Other African-American scholars carried his ideas into sociology precisely because Du Bois provided an alternative to dominant sociological practice.

Du Bois’s life and works point to the significance of intergenerational and cross-disciplinary initiatives as essential components of intellectual production generally, and social science research in particular. The many African-American, Latino, women and working-class sociologists who did enter the field in increasing numbers over the past 100 years all contributed in various ways to sociology’s arrival at its current state. How could one man, no matter how gifted, accomplish as an individual all that has been accomplished by a collectivity?

**Advancing sociology, or disciplining Du Bois?**

In his enthusiasm to correct the historical record, Morris speculates about how sociology might have been changed by the scientific framework that Du Bois endorsed. Morris is on solid ground in showing us the scope of Du Bois’s
conception of the potential of sociology, especially its scientific promise in solving social problems. Morris marshals copious evidence of Du Bois’s commitment to practising professional sociology as a working scientist, to criticizing the frameworks of sociology concerning race and ethnicity, and to seeing the connections between sociology and more democratic social policy. Du Bois not only presented a powerful model for sociology as science, he also presented a way of being a sociologist that refused to contain science to sociology as a profession. Morris suggests that Du Bois had many of the answers to contemporary questions 100 years ago. If early sociology had just included Du Bois, the field might have developed differently.

Certainly, things might have been different had Du Bois been allowed in as a sociological insider. But not necessarily in the way that Morris suggests. Du Bois’s absence clearly made a difference within sociology during its formative years: The Scholar Denied certainly excavates the pernicious effects of Robert Park’s race relations cycle. I can’t imagine Du Bois remaining silent about Park’s viewpoint, especially given his debates with Washington. But what difference would his presence have made?

Let me present a different scenario. Du Bois demonstrated intellectual virtuosity, having that rare ability to engage in multiple forms of sociological practice and place them in dialogue with one another. Via its engagement with pragmatism, early modern American sociology showed a similar predilection for more broad-based engagement. But that was not the direction subsequent sociology took. When it came to Du Bois’s predilection not just for science but also for public sociology, it is naïve to assume that he could have continued on with these close ties to the public. In a context of a professionalizing sociology that was increasingly turning towards science, much of it informed by the very troubling trend towards eugenics, Du Bois would have paid the price that is paid by many contemporary African-American junior sociologists – limiting their vision as the price of getting tenure. Du Bois certainly would have known what he was up against in this matter. But unlike contemporary academics, he was alone. It was just him placed under hyper-surveillance where his every thought, move and action would be subjected to intense scrutiny. And unlike many contemporary junior scholars, Du Bois knew that he had other options. He moved out of the academy and on to other areas of intellectual engagement.
An equally plausible argument is that Du Bois’s sociology was enriched by his exclusion from professional sociology. Whether he wanted to or not, he understood racism not though the rarefied atmosphere of abstract, speculative theory or depersonalized big data sets, but rather through the assaults of everyday lived experience both inside and outside the academy. It is unfortunate that Du Bois had to struggle to make the conditions for his own intellectual work possible. But Du Bois’s story is that of black intellectual production in America. In this regard, while Du Bois was exceptional and unique, his story is all too common.

This outsider perspective on what is taken for granted can be a tremendous asset for intellectual production. For example, would African-Americans have gotten the richness of Du Bois’s racial analysis as editor of The Crisis had these activities been subject to academic norms of professionalism? Would the strictures of his own commitment to science been hamstrung if forced to work within a race relations paradigm where he would have to prove that African-Americans were the equals of whites? What path would his career have taken had the University of Pennsylvania actually hired him and become the institution where he aimed to carry out his Atlanta Studies? Unlike Atlanta, he would not have had classrooms filled with motivated African-American students, and certainly, no network of African-American leaders to whom Du Bois could have turned that would have been acceptable to his university. Du Bois’s not being invited into sociology enabled him to avoid the debilitating tragedy of how a politics of inclusion can be as devastating to intellectual creativity as being banned from schools and jobs in the first place. Morris paints Du Bois’s exclusion from sociology as a lost opportunity for the field. Perhaps. But Du Bois’s actual accomplishments as a public intellectual suggest that sociology’s denial of this particular scholar may have been a blessing in disguise.

On founding fathers, masters of sociological thought, and the sociological canon

In the last chapter, titled ‘Legacies and Conclusions,’ Morris frames the conclusions to his study by presenting the legacy of Du Bois’s intellectual work. Morris claims that Du Bois’s ideas had a wide impact across many fields. Perhaps. Yet, the significance of Du Bois’s legacy for political science, history, psychology, the humanities, and the arts is a case that needs to be made from within these fields, just as Morris did for sociology. Because this question of Du Bois’s academic legacy is so important, and because academic fields differ so dramatically, excavating Du Bois’s legacy requires the same kind of careful historiography that Morris demonstrates in the early chapters of The Scholar Denied.
Unfortunately, this last chapter overreaches by asserting not simply that Du Bois might have influenced other fields of study but rather that his work actually had this impact. There is a major difference between asserting a hypothesis that is upheld by evidence – the case of the earlier chapters that provided a solid argument about discrimination against Du Bois and backed it up with an avalanche of data – and well-meaning yet unsubstantiated speculation about Du Bois’s accomplishments. Take, for example, Morris’s conclusion that ‘Du Bois’s classic work has influenced the important subfields of whiteness studies and the intersectionality approach’ (219). This sentence jumped out at me, primarily because I have a working knowledge of whiteness studies and have contributed to building both black feminism and intersectionality since the 1980s. Du Bois’s arguments and those advanced by scholars working within these interdisciplinary fields of inquiry certainly resemble one another. How does this statement read to people who have done the hard work of excavating and developing these fields, work that resembles Morris’s own painstaking research, often under the same burdens that Du Bois confronted 100 years ago? Stated differently, if you work within either whiteness studies or intersectionality or perhaps both, would you recognize this depiction of Du Bois as being so central to your field as to affect its contours?

I do not take issue with The Scholar Denied writ large. However, the cavalier way in which Morris claims an entire field of study for Du Bois and, by implication, for his own arguments, raises red flags. Morris seemingly knows little about intersectionality, reducing it to an ‘approach’ within sociology. Because the claim that black feminism has been generative of intersectionality has been well supported within black feminist historiography and philosophical work, Morris’s cavalier treatment of intersectionality engages in a double erasure of black women. Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett and other important black women intellectuals that Du Bois knew are nowhere to be found in The Scholar Denied; and the gender analysis that was available to Du Bois from his contemporaries as well as Morris’s own contemporaries is erased. Despite the thinness of his evidence, Morris continues: ‘While it [the intersectional approach] has developed over the last three decades, its intellectual roots are to be found in Du Bois’s work nearly a century ago’ (220). This is an awfully big knowledge claim that credits Du Bois with conceptualizing a field over 100 years ago that black women apparently discovered a mere three decades ago. Via this framing, Morris misses an important opportunity to place his argument in dialogue with similar projects that are also engaged in uncovering neglected or denied intellectuals and fields of study. Morris could just as easily have issued an invitation for scholars in whiteness studies, black feminism and intersectionality to investigate dimensions of their projects that may have been influenced by and themselves shaped Du Bois’s work.
While I remain baffled as to why this one paragraph on intersectionality is here – the book could have done quite well without it – I am more disturbed by how its logic undercuts the seemingly impeccable scholarship in The Scholar Denied’s earlier chapters. Does Morris really believe his own arguments that Du Bois’s work is that amazingly generative, namely, that Western sociology, whiteness studies, black feminism, the interdisciplinary field of intersectionality, and who knows what other contemporary areas of inquiry can all be traced back to Du Bois’s solitary intellect? More ominously, if Morris can advance such an unsubstantiated claims to prove his thesis about intersectionality, where else might he have cut corners? Is this a case of having a laser sharp eye on how sociology’s racial framework has denied Du Bois through exclusion and misrepresentation, yet engaging in practices that are eerily similar when it comes to the intellectual production of black women and other similarly marginalized groups? Or is this a misstep, one where Morris simply got carried away with his zeal for his subject?

Perhaps the framing assumption that underlies the book sheds light on its impetus towards legacy. The Scholar Denied is based on a core premise that a sociological canon exists that is organized via a metaphor of family lineage. We pay homage to founding fathers or masters of intellectual households whose ideas are perceived as seminal to the emergence of our disciplines. Yet, this framing assumption has been challenged from multiple directions. Gender scholars have long taken issue with Western narratives of family lineage that imagine fields of study through a rhetoric of family headed by founding fathers who pass on their wisdom to their progeny. Racial and postcolonial scholars resent uncritical colonial narratives of masters who hold dominion over their slaves, wives and concubines, a practice that erases alternative knowledges from people of colour. Critical scholars of social class see the dominant canon of neoclassical economics as being overly cosy with business interests, a criticism that takes on added urgency in a context of global neoliberalism. Poststructuralists take aim at the very idea of a canon, pointing out that canons typically reflect political interests. These critics do not seek simple inclusion into pre-existing canons or the power relations they uphold. Instead, they criticize the idea of a canon as a technology of power whereby knowledge upholds unjust power relations. How might Du Bois have perceived these critiques of canon formation? Might they too be a defining feature of his legacy?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.