



la società contemporanea

The Color Line and the History of Sociology

Preface

Miranda Fricker introduced the notion of *identity prejudice* as a label for prejudices against people seen as social types and speaks of *testimonial injustice* referring to «the injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer’s part» (2007, 4). Such an “identity-prejudicial credibility deficit” can assume different nuances, according to the prejudice’s base: gender, race, etc., having harmful consequences on individuals and on entire social groups; over time, «systemic patterns of epistemic injustice also harm a community’s knowledge system itself» (Daukas, 2019, 331).

How many times have we read that U.S. empirical sociology was born in Chicago? And how often have we read that with Chicago’s School sociology for the first time leaves university classrooms and walks the streets? Yet, still recognizing the importance of Chicago School, there were other scholars, other approaches, another School prior to that of Chicago: the first great empirical school of sociology was based in a poor-founded Southern University, in Atlanta, by W.E.B. Du Bois¹, a black scholar. If only now we can read that W.E.B. Du Bois was the founder of U.S. empirical sociology is due to the huge interest over the three past decades in U.S. sociology on rewriting the history of the discipline, an attention aimed at repairing the long period of erasure that his figure has sustained.

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, on February 23, 1868; he was the first black to receive a PhD from Harvard University, and in 1896 he was hired by the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a sociological study on the black population of Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward, a study that will be published under the title *The Philadelphia Negro*, now considered as a milestone for urban studies and one of the first great empirical studies in U.S. sociology. Though Du Bois was a brilliant scholar, with two years spent in Germany during his PhD, he was never

¹ Given that his name is often pronounced as in French, or that it is misspelled, it is worth remembering that Du Bois himself wrote that his name «is pronounced in the clear English fashion: Du, with *u* as in *Sue*; Bois, as *oi* in *voice*. The accent is on the second syllable» (Du Bois, 1939).

offered a professional appointment in a major “mainstream” university department; in 1897 he joined Atlanta University accepting the invitation by its President, «a historic black institution located in the heart of black Atlanta. It was a leading, though resource-starved, black university that refused to segregate its faculty and its sprinkling of white students. As a result, Georgia’s state legislature punished it by withholding needed funds» (Morris, 2015, 57).

In this period Du Bois had to distribute his energy between academic research and teaching, and searching for funds, fighting what he later called the “Tuskegee Machine” (1940, 36). It is notorious that Du Bois represented an opposite point of view from Booker T. Washington. In 1881, Washington, a former slave, became the principal of Tuskegee Normal Institute for Industrial Education in Tuskegee, Alabama; he believed vocational and industrial education of primary importance for Black advancement, and this was a position undoubtedly favored by White establishment and entrepreneurs, since it would have produced a more docile labor force, and Tuskegee «became the model for other schools that spread across the South preaching racial uplift through character building and industrial education» (Morris, 2015, 10). Washington became famous at a national level after his speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition on September 18, 1895, criticized for supporting segregation² and, «from 1901 to 1912, the political referee in all Federal appointments or action taken with reference to the Negro and in many regarding the white South. In 1903 Andrew Carnegie made the future of Tuskegee certain by a gift of \$600,000. There was no question of Booker T. Washington’s undisputed leadership of the ten million Negroes in America, a leadership recognized gladly by the whites and conceded by most of the Negroes» (Du Bois, 1940, 36). On the opposite side, Du Bois argued that schools should prepare educated Black students to assume their rightful places as full citizens, believing «a classical liberal arts curriculum would confirm Black intellectual capacity and challenge White racial, economic, political and social dominance» (Allen, Devost and Mack, this issue). The increasing opposition to Washington³ led to the growth of what Du Bois

² One passage of Washington’s speech was particularly criticized: « In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress» (1901, 221-222). Washington’s speech was then characterized as the “Atlanta Compromise”; Hamilton (2017, 208) contrasts what he calls a «ill-conceived interpretation», since «a thorough reading of his address reveals that he called for civil equality under the law».

³ In this context, we may add that Robert E. Park, that all we know as the founder of the Chicago School of sociology, at that time – and for seven years, from 1905 to 1912 – was the press agent, public relations man, ghost writer and general factotum of Booker T. Washington. For an analysis of the relationship between Du Bois and Park, see Morris (2015, Ch. 4 and 5).

called «The Tuskegee Machine»: «Not only did presidents of the United States consult Booker Washington, but governors and congressmen; philanthropists conferred with him, scholars wrote to him. Tuskegee became a vast information bureau and center of advice. [...] After a time almost no Negro institution could collect funds without the recommendation or acquiescence of Mr. Washington. Few political appointments were made anywhere in the United States without his consent. Even the careers of rising young colored men were very often determined by his advice and certainly his opposition was fatal» (1940, 37). A “machine” that was encouraged and funded «through certain white groups and individuals in the North» (*ibidem*) who hoped to «restrain the unbridled demands of white labor, born of the Northern labor unions and now spreading to the South» (*ibidem*). As Du Bois sustained, «It was this point, and not merely disagreement with Mr. Washington’s plans, that brought eventually violent outbreak. It was more than opposition to a program of education. It was opposition to a system and that system was part of the economic development of the United States at the time» (ivi, 38).

In this context, it was not easy for Du Bois to develop his research program, but even confined in a poor funded university, he was a very productive scholar. Du Bois succeeded in promoting and leading an inquiry into the social, economic and physical condition of Blacks in the United States, known as *Atlanta University Study of the Negro Problem*, and between 1896 and 1917 the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory published 20 volumes. But, still, it was not enough to be remembered, at least until now, «the age of Du Bois» (Morris, 2015, xix). Over the last three decades an explosion of works has appeared on his life and scholarship, trying to erode such racist epistemic injustice, in line with a theoretical movement that want to repair all epistemic injustice, such as those related to women founders (Deegan, 1981, 1988a, 1988b, 2014; Lengermann and Niebrugge, 1998; Seltzer and Haldar, 2015) or more generally to peripheral points of view, such as scholar-activists and working-class sociologists (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 2002; Romero, 2020). With this special issue we focus on the racist side of the identity-prejudicial credibility deficit, in particular on the consequences of the racialized struggle over knowledge production in the U.S. that led to the erasure of contribution of Black scholars from the history of sociology and political sciences and the consequent loss for science generally considered⁴.

Aldon Morris presents W.E.B. Du Bois as a founder of scientific sociology in the United States, who developed a pioneering and distinct Atlanta School of sociology. In his article he advances two theses: Du Bois developed an emancipatory school of sociology that theorized and empirically documented the causes of racial and social inequality and that the

⁴ Rabaka (2010) speaks of «epistemic apartheid».

Atlanta School gave rise to pioneering scientific social research at historically Black colleges and universities that served as intellectual weapons in the struggle for racial equality.

W.E.B. Du Bois held different visions from Booker T. Washington for Black Higher Education; while the latter thought that black colleges should accept the “status quo” and teach vocational skills for separate economic development, Du Bois claimed that the better option was to teach a broad curriculum to prepare the “Talented Tenth” for full Black equality. In their article, Walter R. Allen, Audrey Devost and Cymone Mack critically examine the history of HBCUs, emerged from the American Slavery, Jim Crow racism⁵ and racial oppression; in this context, HBCUs lifted the Black community and helped advance American society – despite their, still ongoing, underfunding. Analyzing their place in U.S. higher education (from 1976 to 2015), they show how Black college student enrolment and graduation continue to challenge and dismantle systemic racial inequality in American society and how – despite racial discrimination and disadvantages – HBCUs graduated notable Black scholars, politicians, professionals, and media stars who made monumental contributions to American culture and society.

Krista Johnson focuses on the most important HBCU such as Howard University and a distinguished group of its scholars who, in the 1930s

⁵ The term ‘Jim Crow’ refers to a series of laws and ordinances passed by Southern States and municipalities between 1877 and 1965 legalizing segregation within their boundaries; «the most common Jim Crow laws made it illegal for anyone to marry someone of another race and demanded that business owners separate their customers by skin color and protected their right to legally refuse service to people because of their race» (Tischauer, 2012, 1). «Jim Crow laws spread rapidly through the South, leaving in their wake racial segregation, lynching, white terrorist organizations, widespread black economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement. In the North, de facto racial segregation and widespread economic exploitation and political oppression differed only in degree from the southern Jim Crow regime. Tensions between blacks and white immigrants were acute, giving rise to hostile confrontations and race riots, especially over economic competition, housing, and racial segregation» (Morris, 2015, 7). «The name Jim Crow came from a song and dance routine performed by an actor in one of the very popular minstrel shows touring the country from the 1820s to the 1870s. In one of the traveling shows, Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, a white actor, portrayed an elderly black slave, Jim Crow. Rice appeared on stage in “blackface”. He darkened his face and hands with burnt cork, wore shabby overalls, shuffled across the stage in bare feet, and carried a banjo. His routine included jokes and a song and dance number performed in a white version of black dialect titled “Jim Crow”. [...] The song captured the popular and misinformed white image of slaves, who were always happy, smiling, dancing, lazy, and dim-witted – Africans who found a home on the “ole Marster’s” plantation, far away from the cannibalism and savagery of their home in Africa, the “Dark Continent.” By the mid-1830s, ‘Jim Crow’ had become a term used by whites to refer to all blacks, along with ‘coon’. It came from ‘Zip Coon’, another offensive and degrading minstrel show character played by a white actor with his face coated with charcoal who amused white audiences» (Tischauer, 2012, 1-2).

through 1950s across various fields of social science, broke away both from the mainstream U.S. disciplinary approaches of the time and from the institutional limitations of black universities to engage in transformative scholarship and intellectual theorizing on race and empire in the United States and around the world. Following Johnsons' arguments, as part of a larger effort to confront the coloniality of knowledge and forge an academic and activist decolonial agenda, the Howard scholars established institutions and academic spaces of knowledge production that were unique in the American academy in their organization, mission, vision and methods of research, and played a vital role in sustaining critiques and alternatives to mainstream thinking on race.

Michael Schwartz then provides another clear example of how systemic patterns of epistemic injustice also harm a community's knowledge system itself, and not only subjects wronged by this identity-prejudicial credibility deficit. He discusses the ways in which the Jim Crow structure was enacted and sustained over many decades, how this exclusionary project limited and distorted the research, analysis, and theory developed within the white universities; and how the work of Black sociologists – ignored and dismissed by the white establishment – constitutes a precious heritage of important and still valuable scholarship. This contrast between sterile white establishment scholarship and the still-valuable work of HSBCs scholars is documented by comparing the white and Black scholarship on the first decades of the Great Migration. This comparison demonstrates that even iconic texts by white establishment scholars presented an already disconfirmed portrait of the migration process and dynamics of Black migration from the U.S. rural South to Northern cities; and that distorted portrait of immigration was perpetuated through decades of subsequent establishment scholarship. In contrast the work of Black scholars provided indelible on-the-ground evidence that disproved the theories articulated and perpetuated by their white contemporaries, while documenting a broad theoretical perspective that that remains valuable in understanding contemporary migration issues.

Finally, Paolo Parra Saiani (see “note critiche”) reminds us that in the U.S., over the three past decades, there has been a huge interest in W.E.B. Du Bois and in Black scholars, but only recently we are witnessing the proliferation of works on their role as founders of U.S. sociology at centre of the cultural debate. This has been the result of an intellectual struggle that led in November 2006 the American Sociological Association announcing that as result of a major petition drive one of its major awards – the Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award – became the W.E.B. Du Bois Career Award for Distinguished Scholarship (ASA, 2006). Focusing on three recent books on that subject, the Author focuses on the role of Du Bois in founding the discipline in the United States, the relevance of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, the debate on objectivity and neutrality as a pre-condition for science, and the call for a “Du

Boisian sociology”. While there are differences between them, they all converge in seeing W.E.B. Du Bois as a pioneer of scientific sociology in the United States and a pioneer of public sociology, combining sociology and activism, relevant for contemporary political struggles such as the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. We may agree with Turner when he (talking about Ellwood) stated that «a history of American sociology focused on Chicago, Columbia, and Harvard, and on the current canon, must be inadequate» (2007, 116): yet a canon is – like everything else – a social construction: it’s about scholarship, but it is also about how we understand what scholarship is, who should be included, who should have a voice. Recognizing Du Bois as a founder of U.S. scientific sociology means rewriting that canon, but this is only a (good) starting point.

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