



Paolo Parra Saiani

# Towards a new canon? Rewriting the history (and the future) of sociology

## *Introduction*

In November 2006, the American Sociological Association announced that as result of a major petition drive, «including signatures from two-thirds of the ASA Council and 13 ASA presidents and the necessary number of votes in the May 2006 ASA election», 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). The initiative was carried on by Aldon Morris and Michael Schwartz, who wrote the petition for the change<sup>1</sup>. This case shows that in U.S. sociology 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 and – most important, as the change in the name’s Award suggests and the election of Aldon Morris as the 112th President of the American Sociological Association – their success<sup>2</sup>.

I will focus my attention on three books: *The Scholar denied. W.E.B. Du Bois and the birth of modern sociology*, by Aldon Morris (2015); *The First American School of Sociology. W.E.B. Du Bois and the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory*, by Earl Wright II (2016); and *The sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois. Racialized modernity and the global color line*, by José Itzigsohn and Karida L. Brown (2020). Aldon Morris wants to present «an in-depth, detailed analysis of the reasons why Du Bois should be seen as the founding social scientific school of sociology» (2015, xxi) in the United

<sup>1</sup> Another Prize was renamed following the same petition, the Du Bois-Johnson-Frazier Award becoming the Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award.

<sup>2</sup> *The Scholar denied*, by Aldon Morris, won five best book prizes from three different professional associations and from two sections of the American Sociological Association; «It is a must-read for all sociologists» stated Mary Pattillo and Michael Schwartz (2020, 15) and it has reached a high number of reviews, gaining attention by prestigious scholars: Bobo (2015), Bulmer (2016), Camic (2016), Carson (2016), Collins (2016), Durr (2017), Ferguson (2015), Fleming (2018), Geary (2017), Guimarães (2017), Hamlin (2016), Hunter (2016), Jerabek (2016), Khlevnyuk (2016), Lentin (2017), Martin-Breteau (2017), Muller (2015), Owens (2016), Pattillo (2016), Woodard (2016), Young (2015).

States, Earl Wright II argues that the Sociological Laboratory at Atlanta University preceded Chicago as the first school of collective sociological research based on scientific inquiry, and Itzigsohn and Brown want to define Du Bois's «sociological program and explore what a Du Boisian sociology could be in the twenty-first century» (2020, 25).

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 including the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Indeed, alongside the scientific debate regarding the history of U.S. sociology, there is a parallel discourse about the objectivity of the social sciences, and both are increasingly attracting attention and controversy. In this note I will focus 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”.

### 1. *Who came in first?*

Since the really first phrase of his *Introduction*, Morris wants to clarify his ambitious goal: «There is an intriguing, well-kept secret regarding the founding of scientific sociology in America. The first school of scientific sociology in the United States was founded by a black professor located in a historically black university in the South» (2015, 1). The story is the story of W.E.B. Du Bois: with these objectives in mind, Morris exposes his arguments on the basis of the vast production of Du Bois's empirical research (*The Philadelphia Negro*, above all) and a number of theoretical concepts and analysis (color line, double consciousness, veil<sup>3</sup>). *The Scholar denied* wants to provide an in-depth analysis of Du Bois's intellectual trajectory, his methodological contributions, and his impact on the work of the history of “scientific sociology”. In doing this, Morris rests on extensive knowledge of a wide literature on the subject, also relying on

<sup>3</sup> «Du Bois describes double consciousness as a feeling of twoness, of belonging to two different social worlds – on the one hand, the Black world that is humanity affirming, and on the other one, the white world that denies the humanity of the racialized person. This construction of the self is structured around the veil, which is Du Bois's metaphor to describe how the color line appears in interpersonal relations. In addition to a sense of twoness, double consciousness generates in the racialized person the possibility of second sight, that is, the possibility of seeing and criticizing the world behind the veil, the world of whiteness. On the other hand, the veil makes it impossible for whites to see and recognize the humanity of racialized people (unless they recognize white supremacy and consciously act to dismantle it)» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 218). At the end of Itzigsohn and Brown's book there is the “Glossary of Key Concepts”, with short descriptions of these concepts and their use throughout their book.

archive materials at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Yale University, Atlanta Clark University, on the Robert Park Papers at the University of Chicago, and on archival materials on Booker T. Washington (Morris, 2015, xvii).

*The Philadelphia Negro* is the result of an investigation that «began August the first, 1896, and, saving two months, continued until December the thirty-first, 1897» (Du Bois, 1899, 1) and published in 1899. Even if it was “something of a bestseller [...] already in its fourth edition» in 1904 (Chandler, 2006, 200), and it has been recognized by many scholars as a classic (Lemert, 1994; Anderson, 1996; Katz and Sugrue, 1998; Wortham, 2005; Brown, 2014; Hunter, 2014; Loughran, 2015), its status as America’s first major empirical sociological study has rarely been acknowledged<sup>4</sup> (Morris, 2015, 45) and it has been «largely ignored by mainstream white social scientists for decades» (ivi, 54). If Small (1916) failed to mention Du Bois’s work in his 144-page article about fifty years of American sociology from 1865 to 1915, Morris states that his erasure from mainstream sociology continued throughout the twentieth<sup>5</sup>, a conclusion at which he arrives examining volumes on the origins of American sociology such as Bernard and Bernard (1943), Odum (1951), Madge (1962), Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1974), and Turner and Turner (1990) (ivi, 141-144).

A consequence of this oblivion<sup>6</sup> is that the book has «been out of print for almost half a century; it has been virtually unobtainable, as my own experience of almost twenty years of searching in vain for a copy in second-hand bookstores attests»<sup>7</sup>, wrote Digby Baltzell (1967, ix), author of the *Introduction* to the 1967 edition of *The Philadelphia Negro*. He used a copy lent by «a one-time colleague and friend of the late Professor Du Bois at Atlanta» (*ibidem*), then it is no surprise that it is Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918-1920) *The Polish Peasant* which is formally credited as such: Lewis Coser, for example, called it «a monumental achievement, the earliest major landmark of American sociological research»<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> With some notable exceptions, such as Lemert (1994).

<sup>5</sup> Also Bulmer (1991, 183) recalls that «Out of eleven publications between 1911 and 1952 which reviewed the use of the social survey in sociology, only one mentions Du Bois».

<sup>6</sup> As Calhoun (2007, 32) remembers, even if Du Bois was not always ignored, there was little serious engagement with his sociology.

<sup>7</sup> This statement seems to be in conflict with what we read in *Note on the text* of the 2007 edition of that book edited by Brent Hayes Edwards, since he states that «The book enjoyed great success; McClurg published twenty-four editions between 1903 and 1940, and in 1935 the publisher informed Du Bois that the book had sold fifteen thousand copies. In January 1949 Du Bois bought the original plates from McClurg for one hundred dollars. In the fall of 1953, a Fiftieth Anniversary Jubilee Edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* was published by Blue Heron Press in New York» (2007, xxiv).

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Coser told Aldon Morris that Du Bois did not articulate a theoretical perspec-

Philadelphia then had the second largest urban Black population in the United States (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 98) and Du Bois focused on spatial arrangements, revealing that spatial configurations of Philadelphia were shaped by «decisions made by economic elites to protect white interests», planned phenomena rather than outgrowths of natural ecological processes, as scholars of the Chicago School will sustain later (Morris, 2015, 49). Since «the locations of neighborhoods and businesses were products of those who possessed money and power [...], even within the black community [...] middle- and upper-class blacks separated themselves spatially from the black lower classes to the extent possible given the dictates of Philadelphia's color line» (*ibidem*). Morris, then, recalls that Du Bois acknowledged the works by Charles Booth (1889) and the *Hull House Maps and Papers* (Residents of Hull-House. A social settlement, 1895), but he aims to highlight that «it would be misleading to conflate the contributions of *The Philadelphia Negro* with those of other empirical studies produced at the dawn of the twentieth century. Whereas *Life and Labor of the People in London* and *Hull-House Maps and Papers* examined specific social problems, *The Philadelphia Negro* «was a comprehensive sociologically informed community study» (ivi, 54). Itzigsohn and Brown (2020, 125) argue that Du Bois's analysis of Philadelphia's Black community «is not rooted in a natural history of race relations or city change, as the Chicago approach did, but «on the struggles of the Black community to make a place for itself in the city and the actions of the white population to maintain the color line and protect it from challenges»

While completing *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois conducted the study of Farmville, Virginia's rural black community<sup>9</sup>, examining questions similar to those explored in *The Philadelphia Negro*, a context with obvious different characteristics – North/South, rural/urban communities – but sharing an unbroken chain of social processes: «This approach was to remain a distinguishing feature of Du Bois's sociology» (Morris, 2015, 49).

The route taken by Itzigsohn and Brown is slightly different from that taken by Morris: while the latter has the objective to canonize W.E.B. Du Bois alongside the existing founding fathers of the discipline, the formers are calling «for something much more transformational: to introduce into the discipline an alternative epistemological genealogy of the modern

tive (Morris, 2015, xv); this will be the most frequent criticism, jointly with that of being little systematic and objective, or that Atlanta school's findings were ungeneralizable (Wright II, 2016, 95). Schwartz provides a theoretical explanation of Coser statement: he could not imagine subaltern groups as the agents of social change because it was against «the immutable hierarchy argument. [...] So, for Coser, the mutability of hierarchy, with subaltern groups as the engine of change, was activist fantasy, and not sociological analysis» (Schwartz, 2017b, 4).

<sup>9</sup> *Farmville* was published in 1898, a year before *The Philadelphia Negro*.

world, a genealogy that emerged from its peripheries and exclusions» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 207) and to revise Du Bois' thought (ivi, 25). Precisely the example of the «phenomenology of racialized subjectivity» is their reading of his work since these are not Du Bois's words: «Du Bois was intentionally conducting phenomenological analysis without calling it that» (ivi, 224). The theory of double consciousness analyzes «how the veil interrupts interactions, communication, and recognition among people who inhabit social spaces organized around the color line». Even if the idea of double consciousness was already known, theorists such as James, Mead, and Cooley failed to see the role of the veil, «the work of the color line in the process of self-formation» (ivi, 17). As Lemert asserts, «if the influence of James is direct, [...] Du Bois took it in his own direction. [...] Du Bois's double self concept deserved a prominent place in the lineage of Self theorists» (1994, 389) since he writes «of the doubly conscious, double-self in specific historical reference to the Negro American, while most of sociology's self-theory is just as defiantly ahistorical» (Lemert, 1994, 390). Itzigsohn and Brown reminds us «that the idea of twoness was present in the thinking of Du Bois's contemporaries, but Du Bois gave it a different and particular meaning» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 227) and also Santoro defines the use that Du Bois makes of the widespread idea of double consciousness as absolutely original, such as to upset its many original meanings, and to unleash extraordinary hermeneutic potential (2004, 308).

Morris is not the first claiming that American sociology's birth does not happened at the University of Chicago in the 1920s: for Anderson and Massey, Du Bois's work in the 1890s «anticipated in every way the program of theory and research that later became known as the Chicago School. Although not generally recognized as such, it represented the first true example of American social scientific research, preceding the work of Park and Burgess by at least two decades» (2011, 3-4); Phil Zuckerman wrote that «Years before the famous studies of the Chicago School, Du Bois's sociological output was characterized by a hands-on, empirical research methodology to a much greater and more respectable degree than that of his more famous contemporaries» (2004, 6).

## 2. *Du Bois was not alone*

Morris wants to highlight that although Du Bois is usually «portrayed as a great isolated genius, he actually developed the first school of scientific sociology in the company of many thinkers and researchers»: he brings «these historical actors out of obscurity and onto the academic stage so that their contributions to modern social science can be integrated into the common stock of knowledge» and in this manner, he «resurrect[s] a hidden generation of black sociologists who have been erased from the

collective memory of the discipline» (Morris, 2015, xviii). Furthermore, when Du Bois is cited in introductory sociology textbooks, «recognition of his accomplishments at the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory are never discussed»: no discussion of the school's sociological contributions is presented or acknowledged (Wright II, 2016, 100), even if between 1896 and 1917 the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory published 20 volumes of the Atlanta University Study of the Negro Problems (Wright II, 2016, 20). Even Owens (2016, 1) recognized that while surveying all of the invocations of the term 'laboratory' in early American sociology, he missed «the fact that Du Bois referred to his Atlanta-based research operation as a “sociological laboratory”», despite «several recent articles examining the work of that so-called laboratory by Wright» (2002a, 2002c, 2008, 2009).

For this reason, Wright (2016) dedicated his book – as already did with previous works<sup>10</sup> – to the social laboratory at Atlanta University, arguing that it preceded Chicago as the first school of collective sociological research based on scientific inquiry. The book's structure is based on the analysis of the twenty-volume monograph series *The Atlanta University Study of the Negro Problem*: each volume of the series has been carefully synthesized by Wright in his Chapter 2 (pp. 15-70, all in chronological order). Wright contends that these investigations employed sophisticated techniques of original data collection, including the use of “insider citizen researchers” (2016, 78), from local black communities across the nation<sup>11</sup>.

Morris too describes Du Bois's social scientific school in his Chapter 3 – the longer of eight chapters –, revealing its organizational structure, collaborators, theoretic frame, and providing an overview of some of the main scholarship it produced. After two years spent as professor of classics at Wilberforce University and after losing hope of being hired from University of Pennsylvania or other major universities, Du Bois became professor of economic and history at Atlanta University, where he remained for thirteen years and built a research laboratory in sociology (ivi, 56-57). The annual research projects and the Atlanta Conferences had been launched two years before Du Bois's arrival; Du Bois, immediately upon arrival, developed the “Atlanta Sociological Laboratory”

<sup>10</sup> And in many previous articles: see Wright II (2002a, 2002c, 2002b, 2006, 2008, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The use of “insider researchers” was already highlighted by the same Wright II (2002a, 2008). The underlying reason is not only the lack of funding, but – equally or more important – that «Atlanta University officials took very seriously the fact that abuses by Whites via sharecropping, the convict lease system and general domestic terrorism via the Ku Klux Klan, rendered most Blacks extremely hesitant about either cooperating with the investigative efforts of even the most upstanding White researcher or providing accurate data to someone they could not say with any level of confidence would not use the information gathered in an injurious fashion. [...] the need for *insiders* was stressed» (Wright II, 2016, 77).



(Wright II, 2006, 2016), willing to conduct annual studies addressing a specific research topic each year<sup>12</sup>. Each year, scholars and leaders such as Walter Willcox, Frank Sanborn, Franz Boas, Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, Booker T. Washington<sup>13</sup> converged at Atlanta University to participate in a conference where they would debate the implications of that year's research findings (Morris, 2015, 78). In the following pages (ivi, 58-71) Morris describes how difficult was to establish a sociological school in a University lacking of resources, and how the hidden generation of sociologists (Haynes, Work, and Wright) has been erased from the sociological record.

Still, the role of Du Bois is so important that Morris refers to this intellectual endeavor as “the Du Bois-Atlanta school of sociology” or as “Du Bois’s Atlanta school of sociology” and not the Atlanta School (in analogy with the Chicago School) because «Du Bois played the primary role in developing and sustaining it. At Chicago a major sociology department existed with professors, graduate students, and a sociology journal when Park arrived. [...] In contrast, though an embryonic organizational shell of a school and some intellectual activities existed when Du Bois arrived at Atlanta, the tasks of organizing a sociology department, training students, fine-tuning a research organization, and guiding publications awaited him» (Morris, 2015, 226).

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on how the Atlanta school survived and became a major intellectual influence, leaving behind an important scholarly legacy that is part of the sociological canon<sup>14</sup>, seen the role of Du Bois’s school in founding sociology as an intellectual discipline despite a hostile climate that pushed black sociologists into poor racially segregated universities, which perennially lacked of funds. Despite the lack of adequate resources, as Schwartz pointed out, «For more than a decade Atlanta University was the most (yes, the most) productive center of innovative and rigorous sociological research in the country, and perhaps the world» (2017a, 755). According to Morris, Du Bois was able to sustain such work by relying on ‘liberation capital’:

volunteer or nominally paid labors in research and other scholarly activities that are provided by a self-conscious group of professionals and amateur intellectual workers for a subaltern school of thought that seeks to challenge the intellectual foundations of oppression. [...] The promise of ultimately reaching the collective goal of group liberation serves as the compensation

<sup>12</sup> It is worthy to note that «no comparable research programs existed that produced empirical research on African Americans. For example, the University of Chicago’s sociology department, founded in 1892, did not produce a dissertation on blacks until 1919, and very few followed that one» (Morris, 2015, 76).

<sup>13</sup> Their roles at the conferences is described in Morris (2015, 81-89).

<sup>14</sup> As Turner stated in relation to Ellwood, history of American sociology focused on Chicago, Columbia, and Harvard, and on the current canon, is inadequate (2007, 116).

motivating this cadre of largely unremunerated intellectual workers even when they are faced with professional sanctions for their work. [...] Liberation capital was the basic form of currency that made it possible for the Du Bois–Atlanta school to become a formidable intellectual force (2015, 188).

Unfortunately, the lack of recognition of Du Bois’s role as founder of scientific sociology has led to the suppression of the relevance of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory too, to the benefit of the Chicago’s School<sup>15</sup>, as we may see in many textbooks such as that of Plummer (1997, 1) or Calhoun (2007).

### 3. *Neutrality, partisanship and the quest for objectivity*

In Chapters 1 and 2 Morris deals with the historically context in which US sociology was born, «less than a generation after the emancipation of American slaves» (2015, 6), characterized by racial tensions, Jim Crow laws, lynchings<sup>16</sup>, a massive industrialization rapidly developing American cities, high European immigration rates. To this bleak scenario we may add that in 1904, Ota Benga, a young Congolese so-called “pygmy” arrived from central Africa and was featured in an exhibit at the St. Louis World’s Fair; two years later, the New York Zoological Gardens displayed him in its Monkey House, in a cage, with an orangutan. The attraction became an international sensation, drawing thousands of New Yorkers and commanding headlines from across the nation and Europe (Bradford and Blume, 1992; Newkirk, 2015). Sociology was then born in a climate of extreme racism, «both in popular thought and among intellectuals and social scientists» (Bracey, Meier and Rudwick, 1973, 4): «the consen-

<sup>15</sup> Many Authors – for example, Go (2016b) – wrote that for Coser «[T]he history of sociology in America [...] can largely be written as the history of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago». But Coser added an aside that slightly modifies its meaning: «It seems no exaggeration to say that for roughly twenty years, *from the first world war to the mid-1930s*, the history of sociology in America can largely be written as the history of the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago» (1978, 311-312, mine italics). In 1910 Du Bois left Atlanta University and worked at the NAACP, editing its journal, *The Crisis*, as well as serving as a key administrator in the organization he helped to found (Calhoun, 2007, 32), but he continued to edit Atlanta University publications until 1913, the last before the suspension due to the conflict (Wright II, 2016, 64).

<sup>16</sup> «The 1906 Atlanta race riots marked a major turning point in terms of how Du Bois viewed the import of his sociological approach thus far. For two gruesome days, from September 22 to September 24, white mobs invaded the Black enclaves of the city of Atlanta and slaughtered their residents. The white perpetrators used the tried- and- true scapegoat idea of the alleged rape of white women to justify the wholesale killings of their Black neighbors. Whites lynched Black people, leaving their bodies hanging on trees and lampposts. For two long days Blacks were shot and stabbed, gang raped, and left for dead» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 140).



sus regarding the claims of black inferiority was shared across American social science. [...] It is instructive to keep in mind that the consensus regarding black inferiority cut across all academic disciplines during the first half of the twentieth century» (Morris, 2015, 87). After all, as pointed out by Hamlin, «Academia reflected the society to which it belonged» (2016, 208).

Precisely because this was the context, Morris reminds us, Du Bois «insisted that scientific research on race be based solely on scientific criteria, especially in America given the volatility and entrenched biases associated with the race problem» (2015, 46); he warned that «Any attempt to give it [to science] a double aim, to make social reform the immediate instead of the mediate object of a search for truth, will inevitably tend to defeat both objects» (Du Bois, 1898, 16). However, Morris goes on, Du Bois was not advocating for an “objective” science, but for the production of a *critical* social science, a carefully conducted research that could transform the world (Morris, 2015, 46). Probably not the kind of sociology foundations wanted to fund<sup>17</sup>.

Yet at the turn of the twentieth century, «sociologists struggled to get a foothold inside academia and be recognized as legitimate in the same manner as natural scientists. To receive such recognition, sociologists felt compelled to demonstrate that human behavior was propelled by natural laws as sure as those governing ants or plants» (Morris, 2015, 27). Park’s assault on sociology as a moral science included his aversion to what he called ‘do-goodism’ (Deegan, 2006, 102) because he wanted to engage in social reform while asserting that his work was unbiased<sup>18</sup>. As a result, he promoted a new form of ‘social policy’ studies that were «more politically conservative and acceptable to businessmen and administrators in the academy» (Deegan, 2006, 110). Probably this self-censorship was not really successful, since, still in the Thirties, sociologists will be seen as «blue-nosed reformer[s], ever ready to pronounce moral judgements, against all pleasurable forms of social conduct», and so «the status of sociology, and hence of sociologists was abominable, both within

<sup>17</sup> As Turner (2007, 120) recalls, «Small, in a letter of May 15, 1899, to President Lemuel H. Murlin of Baker University, does mention sociology, and the reference is curious: he says that Ellwood “studied sociology from the standpoint of the philosopher rather than the agitator”. The language is almost certainly a reference to the Bemis affair of 1895. Bemis, an instructor in the University of Chicago’s extension division, who was identified as an economist and sociologist, was fired for a speech in which he criticized the railroads for “their open violations of the inter-state commerce law and their relations to corrupt legislatures and assessors testify to their part in this regard».

<sup>18</sup> But Park mocked clubwomen as early as the 1890s, two decades before he became a sociologist: during this period «he was not defending the discipline’s scientific integrity but merely expressing his patriarchal opinion as a journalist. He carried this bias into the profession of sociology, where he had the institutional power to claim that his position was objective and unbiased» (Deegan, 2006, 111).

and outside the academic community» (LaPiere, correspondence with Deutscher, reprinted in Deutscher, 1973, pp. 36-37).

Giddings stated on May 7, 1924 to Ellwood and Small: «The fact is that I think our membership needs to get in touch with men whose habits of thinking and of research are scientific. I don't like to say this, but as yet the rank and file of our sociologists are not scientifically minded. They are sincere, earnest and intelligent, but woefully untrained (I had almost said uneducated) and I always feel humiliated when I am put in the position of having to defend them (in sociology) when talking with my friends who work in biology and psychology, not to say those who work in physics or even in geography» (cit. in LoConto, 2011, 119). But recognizing the importance of what later Sartre will call *engagement*, is different from being aware of a certain issue: Edward A. Ross wrote to Ellwood:

I hope that your attitude and mine will have some effect in arresting the 'rationalization' of 'ducking' which has been spreading among academic sociologists. Raised as I was on Lester F. Ward I don't give a snap of my finger for a sociologist who wouldn't have an attitude on any of the social problems of his time. In my judgment this knocking of 'reformism' and condemnation of 'value-judgments' is not altogether due to zeal for scientific method. A lot of our men don't want to take risks by assuming an attitude toward contemporary evils which have powerful support; so they duck and justify their ducking by these conceptions of 'science' which you annihilate (cit. in LoConto, 2011, 124).

Since we have never read Ross' condemnation of racism, we must conclude that for Ross racism was not a "contemporary evil". As Hayes pointed out, «In dealing with a phenomenon such as racism, one has, theoretically, three options, namely, to support it, to oppose it, or to claim neutrality. [...] If one claims to be neutral, he is generally indicted by implication, and considered to be a part of the problem.[...] the first era of American sociology is the fact that sociologists' silence supported racism as much as their words. Too often, sociologists choose to remain quiescent in a period marked by racial conflict and divisiveness. [...] A non (value-free) position is at best as dangerous as overt racism. In the case of the latter, there is, at least, a clear position to attack» (1973, 340-341).

Morris makes clear that Du Bois's marginalization is due not only to racism: «economics, power, dominant ideologies and politics were crucial in producing the treatment that Du Bois endured» (Morris, 2017, 71). Go (2016b) is even more explicit: «This is why Du Bois was kept outside the fraternity. He was black, working class, on the side of the oppressed, and committed to empirical research and scholarship to illuminate oppression and guide liberation struggles aimed at overthrowing class, race and gender hierarchies [...] It is not only that Du Bois was black and other sociologists were white, or that Du Bois suffered from lack of capital, it is also that he had dangerous ideas» (*ibidem*).

Du Bois's «dangerous ideas» could not be accepted in a discipline imagined as a natural science, where sociologists had to be unbiased and unaffected by the human behavior they studied (Deegan, 2006, 101). If Park told his students that «the world was full of crusaders. Their role instead was to be that of the calm detached scientist who investigates race relations with the same objectivity and detachment with which the zoologist dissects the potato bug» (Burgess, 1961, 17), Du Bois wrote that «One could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved» (1968, 222). In his own autobiography, Du Bois talked about the case of Sam Hose, an illiterate black farm labourer in Georgia, lynched because he was charged of killing his white employer and of assaulting his wife. In Du Bois's words:

I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta Constitution Office, carrying in my pocket a letter of introduction to Joel Chandler Harris. I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down Mitchell Street along which I was walking. I turned back to the University. I began to turn aside from my work (1968, 222).

As Tate and Back argue (2015), Du Bois was confronted with the limits of science and reason when faced within the violence and barbarism of white supremacy, and Sam Hose's violent fate is a turning point for Du Bois. Following Morris (2015, 134), Du Bois became a pioneer of public sociology, «the discipline's first preeminent public scholar long before such a role was lucrative and celebrated»; Itzigsohn and Brown state that «Du Bois was a public intellectual and an activist who was deeply engaged in public sociology, meaning the type of sociological work produced to bring sociological insights and findings to the public sphere» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 190)<sup>19</sup>.

As Seltzer (2017, 46) reminded us, the single topic receiving most attention from the *American Sociological Review* between 1936 and 1982 was the issue of mate selection, while only 5 per cent of the articles dealt with «the near collapse of capitalism, massive unemployment, bloody struggles between labour and capital, the rise of native and international fascism, World War II, the Cold War, the witch-hunts of McCarthyism, movements for civil rights and racial and sexual equality, near-genocidal wars in Korea and Vietnam, and waves of anti-war and anti-imperialism

<sup>19</sup> Of a different opinion is Blumer: in his opinion, «his conception of public sociology is substantially different from what that term means today, in the context of a much more securely established academic discipline» (Bulmer, 2017, 28-29).

protests»<sup>20</sup>. Is this the neutrality we are looking for? The answer of Itzigsohn and Brown, Morris, and Wright is no.

Du Bois's public sociology and activism presented itself through a wide range of mediums (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 190); as suggested by Morris (2015, 89), Du Bois pioneered a new genre of sociology with *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he mixed sociology with a poetic literary style: «Long before Coser and others formally introduced the idea of sociology through literature and elaborated its use as a teaching tool, Du Bois directly engaged in producing sociology through a literary format». Sociological ideas may be communicated in a fashion «far more attractive than dispassionate arguments and dense statistical tables. In *Souls* Du Bois merged social scientific skills with considerable literary talents to produce a broadly appealing hybrid work linking the humanities and social sciences» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 203). A similar view is shared by Back (2017, 31), who stated that «Du Bois innovated and developed social science but also broke free from the rhetorical conventions and limitations of science writing»; we may for example consider *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* or *Dark Princess*, where he investigates the relationship between class, gender and race.

#### 4. Du Bois, his contemporaries, and ours

Morris talks extensively about Du Bois's relations with Boas and Weber, but also with Booker T. Washington and Park. Notoriously, Washington pushed industrial education and separation “in all things purely social”<sup>21</sup>, while Du Bois argued for a liberal arts education and racial integration at all levels of society, being central for democracy (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 100), «an epic ideological struggle» (Morris, 2015, 104).

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the relationship between the Chicago school, Robert Park<sup>22</sup>, Booker T. Washington, and Du Bois. Morris aims at demonstrating that the Chicago school and Washington had vested interests in marginalizing Du Bois and that this marginalization was not accidental but deliberate; the interaction between economic and political ideologies and power is at the center of his analysis. At the very beginning of his Chapter 5, Morris blames Park of portraying «African Americans as an inferior race», suggesting that he claimed that American blacks

<sup>20</sup> Here, Seltzer is commenting a content analysis by Wilner (1985).

<sup>21</sup> In his famous 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech, Washington urged Blacks in the South to accept the racist political and social order that existed at the time and to concentrate on improving their situation through industrial and vocational training.

<sup>22</sup> Park served as Washington's director of public relations and as ghostwriter from 1905 to 1912 at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

lacked a cultural homeland so to portray blacks «as empty cultural vessels whose salvation depended on their assimilating the superior culture of whites» (Morris, 2015, 124). Morris carries on analyzing (and criticizing) Park's famous "race relations cycle", then provides various citations aiming at demonstrating that Park did view blacks as inferior, such as «It is difficult to conceive two races farther removed from each other in temperament [biological] and tradition than the Anglo-Saxon and the Negro» (Park, 1914/1921, 762); or «The Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist, like the Jew; nor a brooding introspective, like the East Indian; nor a pioneer and frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His metier is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races» (Park, 1918/1921, 136). How much science there is in Park's words? «Park was the subjective, unscientific sociologist, not Du Bois» (Go, 2016b).

Among many positive reviews, the criticism directed at Park raised some negative reactions; Bulmer, for example, whilst generally appreciating Morris' book, wrote that in his judgment Morris «puts the wrong emphasis on Park's sociology by [...] saying that Park portrayed African Americans as an inferior race (Bulmer, 2017, 25). Probably the most vehement defence of Park came from Athens: while claiming that by the 1960's Park's work has become «socially radioactive among sociologists because of the myths circulating about his alleged racism and conservatism» (2020, 77), Athens accuses Morris of «perpetuating these old myths», taking «Park's statements out of context in attempting to demonstrate their bias», drove «less by facts and more by ideology» (ivi, 88)<sup>23</sup>, concluding that «Sociology's past misrepresentation of Du Bois should not now be made an excuse for today's misrepresentation of Robert Park» (ivi, 89).

On the relations with Weber, Morris reserves the entire Chapter 6; his first objective is dispelling the view that Weber mentored Du Bois while he was a student at the Humboldt University of Berlin: for this interpretation, argues Morris (2015, 148-152), there is no evidence. Morris writes that «On one occasion, Weber served as a lecturer in a class in which Du Bois was enrolled, but that was because Weber's mentor fell ill and chose Weber as a temporary replacement» (2015, 150) and – in Du Bois's words – in Berlin, while he was in class he «did not have [...] any personal contact» (1997, 45), although both Du Bois and Weber were «taught by many of the same professors, were mentored by the same scholars of

<sup>23</sup> Curiously, Athens observes – with reason – that the characterization of Negroes as 'feminine', if judged by present-day, feminist's standards, the only men, black or white, who might take offense at Park's metaphor would be sexists (2020, 80). Right. But Park did not use that metaphor today, but in 1918.

the German historical school of economics, and were involved in many of the same intellectual activities in the context of the Verein» (see also Scaff, 2011, 102; Morris, 2015, 152). But much of this chapter concerns their reciprocal influence as colleagues and on «Weber's transformation through the work of Du Bois that Weber read» (Morris, 2015, 155), since early in his career «Weber embraced the notion that biology was an important determinant of racial differences» (*ibidem*). Since Weber was wondering how «race and ethnicity were to be understood sociologically and how these factors affected capitalist markets and the social relations they generated» (ivi, 154), Weber asked Du Bois to write an article on caste relations for *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Scaff, 2011, 102; Morris, 2015, 156).

In his Chapters 7 and 8, Morris seeks to illuminate how Du Bois' work was revealing for generations of black sociologists even if his school was suppressed for a century. Here, he argues that Du Bois was influential not only directly, attracting other scholars to his school, such as Monroe Work, Richard R. Wright Jr., Edmund Haynes, and Mary Ovington (Morris, 2015, 195), but also indirectly, operating «as an “invisible college” that quietly produced scholarship along subterranean channels» (ivi, 196). This would be the case of E. Franklin Frazier, who «expressed his appreciation of Du Bois's influence» recognizing his «pioneer contributions to the study of the Negro family» (ivi, 197), or St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, whose book acknowledge the importance of the color line as an organizing principle of analysis (*ibidem*), and Myrdal, stating that «We cannot close this description of what a study of a Negro community should be without calling attention to the study which best meets our requirements, a study which is now all but forgotten. We refer to W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899» (1944, 1132) and citing extensively Du Bois and his works.

Among the legacies, Morris recalls the emphasis on racial attitudes and identities, as the influence on whiteness studies and the intersectionality approach (Morris, 2015, 219-223). On this point we may find a slight disagreement with Itzigsohn and Brown, according to whom «Du Bois considered gender issues more than most other male scholars and public intellectuals of his time» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 86), but «his analysis of the intersection of race and gender was characterized by serious limitations and was not a central element of his writings»<sup>24</sup> (Itzig-

<sup>24</sup> «Du Bois also fails to adequately recognize the work of Black women intellectuals and activists. In *The Damnation of Women* he cites Anna Julia Cooper's famous statement that only when Black women achieve emancipation will all Black people achieve emancipation. But although Du Bois quotes Cooper, he does not mention her by name. Rather, he attributes her famous phrase to someone he describes as “one of our women”. Similarly, while Du Bois was familiar with Ida B. Wells's work on lynching, he does not credit her in his writings» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 87).



sohn and Brown, 2020, 84). Although Itzigsohn and Brown recognize their admiration for Du Bois, they also acknowledge that he was not a man without faults: while Du Bois «describes the conventions on women and work prevalent in his time as idiotic and states clearly that women have a right to economic independence and to decide on their own about motherhood [...] he does not break with the conventions that equated womanhood and motherhood (2020, 84-85).

Itzigsohn and Brown agree with Morris (2015) that Du Bois's sociology was not only a sociology of race, but go further – deepening their own previous analysis (2015) – calling it a critique of racialized modernity, tied to «colonialism, the creation of race, the invention of whiteness, and the global denial of humanity and multiple forms of exclusion, oppression, exploitation, and dispossession constructed along racial lines» (2020, 15). For them the conceptual category of 'racialized modernity' is at the center of Du Bois's epistemological approach, since it generated «the phenomenology of racialized subjectivity» with the theory of double consciousness (ivi, 17). Modernity was a product of the African slave trade and centuries of slavery, making available an exploitable labour force and crucial commodities such as cotton, tobacco, gold, and sugar. Thus, race stratification was an important determinant in the development of capitalism as were class and status stratifications (Morris, 2007, 524). Du Bois's analysis, indeed, «focuses on how colonial commodities, used for conspicuous consumption in Europe and America, hide the brutality of the exploitation, destruction, and displacement that were required to create them» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 79). This systematic dehumanization – that had been made possible by the color line and the veil, which defines the experience of self-formation (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2015) – has converted a huge part of the world population in a commodity in the service of racial and colonial capitalism (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 187). The color line produced race stratification shaping the social world of the twentieth century, as Du Bois famously predicted: «The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea» (1903, 15), and it is «with the European expansion into the Americas that one of the paramount developments of racialized modernity took place: the invention of whiteness» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 194). For these Authors, racialized modernity is «the idea that racialization, racism, colonialism, and coloniality are structuring elements of the modern world», perpetually reproducing global inequalities «along a multitude of axes, particularly race, class, and gender. The color line is what marks modernity as a singular epoch in the annals of history» (ivi, 187). Also according to Julian Go (2016b, 12), Du Bois was among «the vanguard of the first wave of postcolonial thinkers [...] emphasizing empire and colonialism as foundational for modernity and theorizing imperial racism and knowledge».

## 5. On Du Bois's method

Du Bois articulates his empirical research program in his 1898 *The Study of Negro Problems*, «by far his clearest and most detailed articulation of his methodology for urban and community studies» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 112). «Du Bois's research methodology was based on thorough and detailed descriptions and interpretations of communities, their social and historical contexts, and the actions of the people who lived within them» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 126). He made use of the empirical techniques pioneered by Charles Booth and he was also directly influenced by Hull House's publications. They all utilized surveys, questionnaires<sup>25</sup>, and maps to produce data-driven essays that captured social conditions confronting Chicago's poor (Morris, 2015, 52). But Morris argues that it would be misleading to conflate the contributions of *The Philadelphia Negro* with those of other empirical studies produced at the dawn of the twentieth century because *Life and Labor of the People in London* and *HMM&P* examined specific social problems, while *The Philadelphia Negro* was a comprehensive sociologically informed community study (Morris, 2015, 54). In *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois uses «extensive interviews with all families [...], surveys, archival data, and ethnographic data from participant observation [...] a pioneer in the multimethods approach» (Morris 2015, 47) and triangulation: in this last statement, Morris follows the works of Wright II (2002b, 30, 2008, 197). The claim that Du Bois was a frontrunner of the approach later called multimethod, mixed methods or triangulation<sup>26</sup> has been comprehensively examined by Wright II (2016, 79-80).

Du Bois challenged “car-window sociologist”, «who seeks to understand and know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries» (Du Bois, 1903, 105), as Du Bois reproached Willcox: «the fundamental difficulty in your position is that you are trying to show an evaluation of the Negro problem – only from inside your office. It can never be done. If you must go on writing on this problem why not study it. Not from a car-window [...] but get down here and really study it at first hand» (Du Bois, 1904, in 1973). Du Bois often resided in communities he studied and interviewed and surveyed thousands of people, so it was easy for him to declare «we study what others discuss», a statement chosen by Wright II for the title of Chapter 2 of his book (2016). As Wright recalls, Du Bois argued that

<sup>25</sup> The research instrument that today we call ‘questionnaire’ was called ‘blanks’ at the turn of the century, as Wright II (2016, 22) reminds us.

<sup>26</sup> It is better to recall that these expressions are often used as synonyms, but their use is referred to different epistemic and methodological approaches; among others, see Flick (2018, Ch. 7) and Mauceri (2016).

«many White sociologists and social scientists often conducted scientific investigations into the social lives of Blacks in America by causally observing their interactions from afar for brief moments then using that data to develop grand theories on the entire race» (2016, 17). Du Bois, on the contrary, lived with the people he studied, joined their social life and visited their homes. Du Bois's pioneering multimethod approach was evident (Morris, 2015, 67).

For Itzigsohn and Brown, the «methodological point of Du Bois's global and historical sociology is the standpoint from which one looks at social and historical changes. Du Bois looks at capitalism from its margins, from the perspective of the colonized, enslaved, and racially excluded workers» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 70). The two Authors state that Du Bois's empirical program and that of Chicago are different for different reasons: *i*) his mixed-methods approach combined historical analysis, interviews and statistical analysis; *ii*) his studies were rooted in his theoretical understanding of racialized modernity as a power-laden structure; *iii*) as opposed to Chicago's sociology, Du Bois did not search for universal patterns and generalizable concepts, «recognizing the multiplicity of experiences of urban and rural African American communities» (ivi, 189). Consequently, according to Itzigsohn and Brown, sociology should not seek «generalizable ahistorical concepts or mechanisms» but rather understand «the structures of exploitation and oppression, as well as analysis of forms of agency and subjectivity, in their historical context. This does not mean that concepts cannot be generalized, but rather that one needs to account for the historical contexts in which concepts are developed and applied. [...], a Du Boisian global sociology seeks to explore the relations between the global characteristics of racial and colonial capitalism and its local concrete manifestations» (ivi, 95). As an example of what does historicity means, Itzigsohn and Brown argue that we should not use concepts as 'double consciousness' or 'veil' as universal and generalizable, since «we need to take into account concrete historical forms of domination» (ivi, 60), unlike Park and the Chicago School, which focused on social problems ignoring «processes of interaction and conflict between situated actors» (ivi, 125).

Du Bois also «innovated methodologically by using his own experience to reflect on the structural conditions of racialized modernity», since in many of his works «he used autobiographical reflections to provide a structural analysis of regimes of power and exclusion» (ivi, 190).

## 6. *A Du Boisian sociology, today*

A distinctive feature of Itzigsohn and Brown's book is their ambition for calling "A Manifesto for a Contemporary Du Boisian Sociology", title of their Chapter 5 (pp. 185-211). For these two Authors, a contemporary Du Boisian global sociology would examine historical and contempo-

rary forms of racial and colonial dispossession and exploitation and go beyond Du Bois's own analysis, considering processes of dispossession and displacement of indigenous people and historical and contemporary forms of settler colonialism; it would search for the links between global structures and the phenomenology of lived experience, and examine the subjectivity and agency of the subaltern groups, exploring how they construct their world and struggle for dignity, and how the veil blinds dominant groups to the plight of racialized others – others such as racialized workers, migrants, prisoners, and marginalized people. It would also critique the construction of racial and colonial forms of knowledge in the sciences and the public sphere and it would analyze the historical and contemporary forms of the intersection of race, class, and gender; going beyond Du Bois's own limitations and fully incorporate the analysis of intersectionalities, both in the formation of inequalities and in the interpersonal and experiential dimensions (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 94). From a methodological point of view, «it would root its analysis in the historical context. At the same time, it would be eclectic concerning the forms of data collection» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 128).

Such a sociology «is close to the postcolonial sociology proposed by Julian Go (2016a), expanding the «conceptual and epistemological boundaries of sociology by bringing forward perspectives ignored by metrocentric claims to universalism», «a perspectival realism that would bring multiple standpoints into sociological analysis» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 96). A sociology with the aim to explain «how people are pushed to live under certain conditions and how people respond to those conditions», and obviously – given such premises – «a public sociology [...] concerned with the fundamental questions of change and equality» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 129), «an activist project in that it aims to use knowledge to make this world better for the oppressed and for those who are written off as expendable» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 192).

Maybe this latter argument will be more divisive than others: if recognizing the role of Du Bois and that of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory in the founding of the discipline may be easier and – after all – devoid of practical consequences (although significant in symbolic terms), embracing the approach of a Du Boisian sociology as proposed by Itzigsohn and Brown will surely raise objections, like the ones highlighting the risk correlated to the loss of objectivity that may lead to «the end of sociology» (Turner, 2019).

## 7. *Final remarks*

More than racism was involved in marginalizing Du Bois's scholarship, since economics, power, dominant ideologies and politics were crucial in producing the treatment that Du Bois endured (Morris, 2017, 71). As

Go synthesized, he had dangerous ideas (2016b). Indeed, while Morris (2015) and Wright II (2016) documents how Du Bois and his school were marginalized and erased from the history of sociology, evidence abounds that such erasures are widespread, as Deegan (1988) and Seltzer and Haldar (2015) demonstrated about the pioneering female sociologists at Hull House: marginalized by mainstream sociology and erased from sociology's collective memory.

Du Bois, then, is recalled a precursor in many fields: he was «among the vanguard of the first wave of postcolonial thinkers. His work shared and in some cases prefigured the themes of the other postcolonial writers, emphasizing empire and colonialism as foundational for modernity and theorizing imperial racism and knowledge» (Go, 2016a, 12). But the list of things he excelled in is very long: he was «the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard» (Morris, 2015, 15), «the first sociologist to study racism and to name it for what it was» (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 102), and the first challenging racist theories on the physical and biological inferiority of Blacks with scientific studies (Wright II, 2016, 91), «conducting the first sociological study on religion in the United States» (see also Zuckerman, 2000; Wright II, 2016, 91), the first social scientist to establish a sociological laboratory where systematic empirical research was conducted (Wright II, 2002c, 2006, 2016; Morris, 2015, 3; Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, 121), «one of the first American social scientists to make use of the empirical methods pioneered by Booth» (Morris, 2015, 53), «among the first professors to teach sociology to black students in the United States at the secondary, undergraduate, and graduate levels» (Morris, 2015, 90), «the first scholar to stress the need to study the black family in America against the background of its African past» (Morris, 2015, 121), «almost the first to recognize that these rude plantation hymns represented a real literature» (Morris, 2015, 123), «one of the first to convey sociology through literature and journalism» (Morris, 2015, 135), «the first sociologist to develop the foundation of what has become the social constructionist approach to race» (Morris, 2015, 219), «the first sociologist that engaged in intersectional analysis» (Morris, 2015, 220), «the first number-crunching, surveying, interviewing, participant-observing and field-working sociologist in America, a pioneer in the multimethods approach [...] he also pioneered the data-gathering technique known as triangulation» (Morris, 2015, 47), as «the earliest example of triangulation is found in the 1897 Atlanta University study *Social and Physical Condition of Negroes in Cities*» (Wright II, 2016, 79); thanks to the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, the use of citizen researchers (often graduates or students of Atlanta University, students from other predominantly Black institutions, etc.) to assist with data collection was institutionalized (Wright II, 2016, 77-79), and the first American sociological unit to institutionalize the acknowledgment of the limitations of one's research (Wright II, 2002c, 347 ff., 2016, 91). Conversely, *The*

*Philadelphia Negro* is not only «the first scientific study of an urban black community» (Morris, 2015, xix), but also «one of the first empirically based scientific studies of American sociology» (Morris, 2015, 50 and 68); *Farmville* «The first empirical study of rural sociology in the United States» (Morris, 2015, 49).

But this sort of Guinness Book of Sociological Records was not sufficient to Du Bois nor to his Atlanta Sociological Laboratory to be included not even in a second-tier canon. The formation of a canon is generally seen as the outcome of a collective cultural process; «determining canonicity is not simply a matter of persuading others of the merits of particular authors or texts», since it is constituted through «the historical configurations of social relations that enable and obstruct the participation of particular others at any given time» (Bhambra, 2014, 476; see also Guillory, 1987).

The huge number of articles, books and seminars dedicated to Du Bois and his approach should not mislead us and make us think that his canonization has been reached or that there is a general consensus on that issue. Reactions to the “Du Boisian movement” – although limited – are strong.

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche (DISPO)  
Università di Genova

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