

Introduction

Race and the Birth of American Sociology

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. This reality flatly contradicts the accepted wisdom.

A broad consensus exists among sociologists that the Chicago school, which emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century, was the first school of American empirical sociology.¹ This hegemonic narrative maintains that the school's primary leader was the premier second-generation University of Chicago sociologist Robert Ezra Park. The Chicago school of sociology, which dominated the field well into the 1930s, was housed in the University of Chicago's prestigious department of sociology, founded in 1892, which included such other pioneering first-generation sociologists as W.I. Thomas, Charles Henderson, Ernest Burgess, Ellsworth Faris, and the chairman, the innovative Albion Small. These founding faculty members were augmented by the social psychologist George Herbert Mead and the philosopher John Dewey, both housed in Chicago's philosophy department, and colleagues in the geography and political science departments. The dominant narrative claims that this faculty, and especially Park, produced the major theories, concepts, and pathbreaking textbook that guided the emerging field for decades. The Chicago department trained large numbers of graduate students who conducted empirical research, published their scholarship

widely, and became leaders in the field, thus spreading the influence of the Chicago school throughout American sociology and the other social sciences. Numerous works of the faculty and students were published by the University of Chicago Press and by the first journal of American sociology, the *American Journal of Sociology*, also published by the University of Chicago Press and edited by University of Chicago sociology professors.

The architects of the Chicago school established deep organizational roots at the University of Chicago. They successfully secured the funds that allowed it to build a formidable infrastructure to support the research activities of faculty and graduate students. Additionally, the city of Chicago served as a social laboratory where empirical research was conducted on the major social processes unfolding in one of the world's great modern cities. Because of these characteristics, the Chicago school dominated the early field of sociology, thus marking the rise of American scientific sociology. This lily-white and elite conception of the origins of American sociology has long been accepted as received wisdom.

Yet although it was only occasionally articulated in the twentieth century, there is a counterview. It argues that in the first years of that century the black sociologist, scholar, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois developed the first scientific school of sociology at Atlanta University, a historically black institution of higher learning located in the heart of Atlanta's black community. This counterview is largely unknown in mainstream academia, for it flies beneath the academic radar, disconnected from the dominant narrative of the origins of American sociology. Nevertheless, it has become more visible and has been developed by a small number of innovative scholars.² Even before it was explicitly formulated, a number of earlier accounts documented the importance of Du Bois as a black sociologist and his enduring but usually unacknowledged influence as a pioneer in sociology.³ This tradition regarding Du Bois's importance as a sociologist has continued in contemporary accounts.⁴ Though these earlier works provide only the beginnings of a definitive counternarrative, they nevertheless represent a solid foundation on which to build a comprehensive and accurate account of the emergence of American scientific sociology. Upon this foundation, I will develop an analysis of the myriad factors that gave rise to the Du Bois–Atlanta school.⁵

Definite political, economic, cultural, and personality factors led white social scientists to suppress Du Bois's scholarship of race and his unique contributions to the developing social sciences at the dawn of

the twentieth century. That scholarship stood in direct opposition to the dominant racist views held by most social scientists, especially white sociologists. During this period, the Jim Crow regime, which defined blacks as biologically and culturally inferior, was developing deep roots. Du Bois's sociological arguments stressing that races were socially constructed and blacks were not biologically inferior flew in the face of white racial beliefs. As James McKee has demonstrated, white social scientists concurred with the general white consensus that blacks were created inferior and incapable of functioning as social equals of whites.⁶ For them, genetics and culture, rather than social conditions, produced racial inequality. Yet that "scientific" knowledge constituted scientific racism, for it was based on folk concepts rather than careful, systematic, empirical research. The racial analyses of white social scientists, therefore, provided ideological cover for racism.

For Du Bois, externally imposed social conditions constituted the foundations of race oppression and white supremacy. In contrast to white social scientists, Du Bois insisted that the newly emerging social sciences be built on careful, empirical research focused on human action in order to pass the test as genuine science.⁷ Because he believed that an authentic social science was possible and that inferior and superior races did not exist, Du Bois was the first social scientist to establish a sociological laboratory where systematic empirical research was conducted to determine the scientific causes of racial inequality. In this manner, Du Bois treated claims of inherent race superiority as hypotheses to be accepted or rejected on the basis of data collected through the best scientific methods available. Given his approach, Du Bois decried any racial findings stemming from racial prejudice and vested interests. Therefore, as the twentieth century opened, Du Bois continued to develop a sociology whose mission was to interject science into the emerging field by relying on data and the execution of scientific research based in empirical methodologies. This book will demonstrate that Du Bois, and his collaborators, did indeed build a sociological school that challenged scientific racism by generating findings suggesting races were socially constructed and that social conditions largely determined racial inequality. From a purely scientific perspective, Du Bois's school of sociology examining race was superior to the "scientific" research of the period—and of decades to come—that was based largely on conjecture, speculation, racist assumptions, and scant empirical data.

Thus there were obvious reasons why white sociologists suppressed Du Bois's scholarship. To embrace Du Bois's sociology, they would need

to acknowledge that their theories proclaiming the biological and cultural inferiority of blacks could not be supported scientifically. Such an admission would have placed white social scientists at odds with the racial views of the white majority and those of white elites in particular. That would have been too ideologically jarring for them because they shared the white racist consensus and were not willing to distance themselves from the white privileges that sustained their “science.”

Additionally, there were deep personal and cultural reasons why white social scientists suppressed Du Bois’s scholarship. Early in the twentieth century, whites viewed all African Americans as inferior, even black intellectuals such as Du Bois. White social scientists could not embrace black excellence in science, let alone the superiority of a black scientist. To acknowledge Du Bois’s pioneering science, they would have had to admit that Du Bois was a scientific role model deserving white followership. They could not conceive such a view and definitely could not translate it into practice. Thus they suppressed Du Bois’s scholarship because it concluded that there were no scientific grounds on which to justify racial oppression and because they could not view Du Bois as an exemplary scholar who pioneered scientific sociology. Because the stakes were exceedingly high for white sociologists, Du Bois’s sociology was suppressed, resulting in an impoverished sociology that endured over a century.

On the basis of my findings, I will argue that the Du Bois–Atlanta school deserves credit for founding scientific sociology in America. This book documents the unique contributions that Du Bois’s school made to the development of American sociology in terms of scholarship, research, and teaching.

I posit that it was Du Bois who made the most distinctive contribution to American sociology in the first half of the twentieth century. That contribution, rooted in the idea that sociology was an empirical science, consisted of producing community studies and theoretical formulations based on empirical methodology.⁸ Though Du Bois’s pioneering community studies utilized scientific methodology two decades before Park and his students, this distinctive contribution has nevertheless been attributed to the Chicago school. Moreover, I will provide evidence that Park knew about Du Bois’s pioneering studies but failed to accord them the scholarly credit they merited. Even worse, by ignoring Du Bois’s groundbreaking scientific work, the Chicago school, mainstream sociology, and social science generally were impoverished theoretically and methodologically for a century—and this is especially

true regarding the study of race. Because Park and the Chicago school failed to acknowledge and engage the work of Du Bois and his students, they were able to claim Chicago's primacy. This stance prepared the way for succeeding generations of scholars to reproduce this fictitious account, thus solidifying the claim that Chicago was the first school of American scientific sociology. The influence of this inaccurate account of the origins of American sociology reflects the wisdom of W.I. Thomas's precept: If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.⁹