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In Pursuit of Justice: W.E.B. Du Bois

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ABSTRACT

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963) was one of the American pioneers of sociological practice. Du Bois made major contributions to the development of this country through his scientific and popular publications and through his organizational efforts. This article serves as an introduction to Du Bois' work. The first section is about Du Bois' writing and intervention activities and the second focuses on his relationship to the field of sociology. The third section provides information about Herbert Aptheker (1915—), the historian who edited Du Bois' published writings and was custodian of his unpublished work and correspondence. This article introduces Du Bois' 1944 autobiographical essay, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," and Aptheker's "W.E.B. Du Bois: Struggle Not Despair."

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963) was one of the American pioneers of sociological practice. Du Bois made major contributions—as a clinical and applied sociologist—to the development of this country through his scientific and popular publications and through his organizational efforts. He was a founder and general secretary of the Niagara Movement, an early advocate of women's rights (Aptheker, 1988), a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and, from 1910 to 1934, the internationally known editor of *The Crisis*.

This article serves as an introduction to Du Bois' work. The first section is about Du Bois' writing and intervention activities and the second focuses on his relationship to the field of sociology. The third section provides information about Herbert Aptheker,¹ the historian who edited Du Bois' published writings and was custodian of his unpublished work.

Du Bois engaged in numerous important activities that are not very well known. In 1900, for example, he unsuccessfully challenged the Southern Railway systems for denying him, on racial grounds, a sleeping berth and petitioned the Georgia state legislature regarding cuts in funds for black public schools. In 1917 he was in the front ranks of an NAACP-organized march in New York City to protest lynching. That same year he collected testimony from survivors of an East St. Louis massacre of blacks. In 1918 Du Bois helped organize the Negro Cooperative Guild—to study and coordinate black-run cooperatives—and in 1919 he organized and was elected executive secretary of the first Pan-African Congress. In the 1920s, “along with Alain Locke, [Du Bois] was a founder of the so-called Harlem Renaissance” (Aptheker, 1990) and in 1950 Du Bois was the Progressive party candidate for the U.S. Senate from New York. He was also, over the years, a newspaper columnist, a novelist, a poet, the founding editor of *Phylon* and a co-founder and the editor of *The Brownies' Book*, a magazine for black children.

Du Bois dedicated his life to trying to bring about a more just society.² In the course of doing this, he put new initiatives in place and did not hesitate to criticize individuals or programs when he felt the criticism was warranted. In 1918 the Department of Justice warned him that he risked prosecution for his criticism of racism in the U.S. armed services. At times he was at odds with Booker T. Washington, the NAACP, Marcus Garvey, the American Communist party, and the trustees of Atlanta University. In 1951, at age 83, he was indicted by the U.S. government—accused of being “an unregistered, foreign agent”—and in 1952 the federal government arbitrarily refused to issue him a passport. The last two matters were resolved, eventually, but not without restriction, pain, and, finally, a change of citizenship.

At age 93, in 1961, Du Bois left the United States to work in Ghana, a country where he received “worshipful, esteemed status” (Horne, 1986:344). He went there to undertake a major project, the *Encyclopedia Africana*, but he also left because he was frustrated. Several weeks before his departure, he wrote a letter to a woman who was having difficulty securing decent housing: “I just can’t take anymore of this country’s treatment . . . We leave for Ghana October 5th and I set no date for return . . . Chin up, and fight on, but realize that American Negroes can’t win” (Horne, 1986:345).

Four days before he went to Ghana, Du Bois wrote to Gus Hall, chair of the Communist party of the United States, to request membership in that organization. The party accepted Du Bois on October 13, eight days after he had left this country (Rampersad, 1976:261).

According to Herbert Aptheker (1990), Du Bois knew that he probably would not be able to renew his passport because of his communist affiliation.³ Du Bois and his wife went to the U.S. Consulate in Ghana and the consulate

did indeed refuse the renewal. Shirley Graham Du Bois was “outraged” by this decision and she suggested that her husband inquire about becoming a citizen of Ghana (Aptheker, 1990). Du Bois received Ghanaian citizenship—and a passport. Two years later, in 1963, Du Bois died in Ghana, a country where he was honored both in life and in death (Shirley Graham Du Bois, 1971:367).

* * *

Arnold Rampersad (1976:vii), in his *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, has urged readers not to regard Du Bois as “simply . . . a historian or sociologist or propagandist.” There is not much to worry about as far as many establishment sociologists are concerned.⁴ They seem happy to recognize Du Bois as a man of all disciplines rather than as a sociologist. They generally have not recognized Du Bois’ contributions to the development of sociology (Green and Driver, 1978:39–42)⁵ or to many of the field’s subspecialties (Green and Driver, 1978:41–42; Coates, 1989).

Even those who recognize Du Bois’ contributions often do so in a limited way.⁶ Take the following examples:

Du Bois began his career as an empirical sociologist . . . Du Bois left the United States in 1892 as a Harvard-trained historian with a background in philosophy; two years later he returned as an empirically oriented sociologist . . . During his early years at Atlanta [University], Du Bois wrote most of his sociological material. Still striving to maintain a scientific orientation, and still optimistic that black progress could be built upon a foundation of empirically based data . . . A related issue which also led Du Bois away from sociology was his involvement in the Niagara movement . . . [In 1933] he had returned to academic life and sociology, he retained enough of his propagandistic bent to impair his objectivity as a social scientist. More simply, he was no longer the objective, empirically oriented sociologist who had taught at Atlanta from 1897 to 1910, he was now more action-oriented, politicized and “radical.”

—Green and Driver, 1978:1, 8, 16, 24

In 1909 [Du Bois] became a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1910 he left Atlanta University to work for the new organization. For a brief period he continued the Atlanta studies, but his basic interests now lay elsewhere. Although Du Bois himself thus left the field of sociology . . .

—Rudwick, 1974:50

Most of what may be termed the purely sociological work of Du Bois was written [during] the 24 year period between 1896 and 1920. Before this period Du Bois was primarily a student, while after this period he was primarily a publicist/civil rights activist.

—Coates, 1989:3

Although DuBois (sic) had left sociology for social action, by 1920 . . .

—Smith and Killian, 1988:12

Du Bois never left sociology—he took sociology with him. What he left (between 1910 and 1915) was an academic setting.

A 1944 essay by Du Bois, reprinted here, provides some basic information about his connections to sociology. The essay appeared in a book initiated by The University of North Carolina Press. The Press hoped the volume would allow the country, particularly the South, “to know what the Negro wants” (Couch, 1944:ix). Rayford Logan, a professor of history and acting dean of the Graduate school at Howard University, was asked to edit the book and Logan, in turn, selected thirteen additional contributors.

Logan (1944:vii) arranged the contributions beginning with “those that give in largest measure an overall picture.” He wrote the introductory piece—“The Negro Wants First-Class Citizenship”—while the second entry, “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” was the work of W.E.B. Du Bois.

Du Bois’ autobiographical essay was written when the author was in his mid-seventies. It provides some information about Du Bois’ direct connections to sociology—e.g., his academic work at Harvard,⁷ his studies with Schmoller and Weber, his offer to teach sociology at Wilberforce,⁸ his work in Philadelphia,⁹ and his development of the Atlanta Conferences, including the 1943 meeting for the seventeen Negro land grant colleges in the South.¹⁰

Particularly interesting are the ties that Du Bois makes between science and social change. Du Bois (1944:59) recalls that, when he was in his forties, he “followed the path of sociology as an inseparable part of social reform, and social uplift as a method of scientific investigation . . .” He said he was changing his attitude about the social sciences. He thought there “could be no . . . rift between theory and practice, between pure and applied science.” Du Bois (1944:57) discussed the times when action came before the “last word” of science:

I faced situations that called—shrieked—for action, even before any detailed, scientific study could possibly be prepared . . . I saw before me a problem that could not and would not await the last word of science, but demanded immediate action to prevent social death. I was

continually the surgeon probing blindly, yet with what knowledge and skill I could muster, for unknown ill, bound to be fatal if I hesitated, but possibly effective, if I persisted.

A review of Du Bois' earlier work shows he had a long-standing concern with sociology, science, and social change. In a speech (Du Bois, 1897:37) to the sociology club at Atlanta University in 1897, for instance, Du Bois stressed the mission for such an organization:

The aim . . . ought to be to furnish accurate information to such agencies as are engaged in the work of social reform, to endeavor to increase the cooperation between these agencies and to seek to establish new agencies for reform in neglected and unknown fields of effort.

His concern also is evident in his "A Program for Social Betterment." Du Bois gave a presentation, with this title, around 1908 to the first sociological society of Atlanta, Georgia. Du Bois again indicated the important link between science and social reform and he gave examples of 32 specific initiatives which might be undertaken by the group. The listing included many practical and colorful suggestions such as a "mission" which would "provide ice for [the] poor and encourage flower-raising"; "maternity refuges" for "women in confinement"; an "anti-credit crusade" which would "encourage cash buying" and a "dress reform" which would advocate "warm, simple clothing and [the] prevention of extravagance."

A number of factors may explain why some sociologists completely overlook Du Bois' work or think his sociological contributions came only during the early part of his career. Some authors simply have not been exposed to Du Bois' work and others may have uncritically accepted a "common" view that only the early work "counts." Others may have deliberately or unconsciously disregarded Du Bois' work as sociological because they don't accept clinical activities as a legitimate sociological pursuit, because Du Bois was so open about his political beliefs (particularly his periodic identification with socialist or communist groups) or because he often wrote in the popular press.

Still others may have been affected by Du Bois' own writing. It becomes easy for an author to lose identification with the discipline when one or more of the following happens: no affiliation with a sociology department; the name of the discipline does not appear in article titles; the discipline's jargon is not used as frequently as in the past, and frequent publication but not in the well-known sociology journals.¹¹

Du Bois (1944:57) acknowledged he changed his emphasis or focus at various times during his professional life but that does not mean he stopped

being a sociologist. He is connected to the discipline of sociology—and to several other fields—from the beginning to the end of his career.

* * *

In 1940 Du Bois made his first contact with Herbert Aptheker (1915—), a young, white historian. Du Bois sent Aptheker a letter to tell him that he liked his review of *Dusk of Dawn* (Du Bois, 1940).¹² Aptheker (1988) wrote back and this correspondence began a remarkable relationship that would last for over twenty years.¹³ Aptheker received his Ph.D. in 1943 from Columbia University and, after returning from Army service during World War II, was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. As Aptheker had no office in 1946, Du Bois, who was working for the NAACP in New York City, offered to share his own while Aptheker edited *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. Aptheker had the opportunity, for one full year, of being able to get first hand information from the authority who sat some five feet away.

During that year Du Bois asked Aptheker, a man whose ideas and interests were similar to his own, to edit his published writings and be custodian of his unpublished work and correspondence. Du Bois trusted Aptheker and thought his “lengthy *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* [was] a work seldom equaled and certainly not excelled by any historian” (Shirley Graham Du Bois, 1971:324).

Du Bois wrote the following in the preface of Aptheker’s multi-volume history:

It is a dream come true to have the history of the Negro in America pursued in scientific documentary form. . . . For fifteen years Dr. Aptheker has worked to find and select 450 documents to make an authentic record and picture of what it meant to be a slave in the Land of the Free, and what it meant to be free after the Emancipation Proclamation. . . . I hasten to greet the day of the appearance of this volume, as a milestone on the road to Truth.

Aptheker, like Du Bois, is a prolific writer. He is admired particularly by progressives for his diligent scholarship and because “for more than four decades [he] has defended working-class interests and struggled against the racism that pervades U.S. society” (Berlowitz and Morgan, 1987:8).

Aptheker has written numerous articles and is the author or editor of more than 80 books. Among those he has written are *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), *The World of C. Wright Mills* (1960), the *Annotated Bibliography of the Published Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois* (1973), *The Literary Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois* (1989a) and *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (1989b).

Aptheker has edited 41 volumes of Du Bois' work such as *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses by W.E.B. Du Bois* (1985b) and *Creative Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois: A Pageant, Poems, Short Stories and Playlets* (1985c).

Aptheker (1988, 1989c, 1990) is a scholar-activist who has taken part in the "struggle against racism and imperialism for over fifty years." In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Aptheker assisted in trade union organizing in Virginia and North Carolina and served as secretary of the Abolish Peonage Committee in Georgia. He also distributed pamphlets such as his ten-cent *The Negro in the Civil War* after lecturing at some of the historically black colleges in the South. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Aptheker broke bans on radical speakers by giving presentations at more than 50 colleges and universities. In the mid-1960s, he organized a trip to Hanoi. He also ran unsuccessfully for a U.S. House seat in 1966 and a U.S. Senate seat in 1976.¹⁴

In 1988 Herbert Aptheker received an invitation to speak at Columbia University, the school that had awarded him his Ph.D. some 40 years earlier.¹⁵ Just before his evening presentation he quietly let his hosts know that this was the first time he had been officially invited back to the university since he lost his work there with Professor William L. Westermann in the late 1930s. Aptheker (1990) believes he lost his position as part of the purge of radicals that was going on nationally as well as in the state of New York.

Aptheker is now 73 years old. The dedicated scholar, with his black-rimmed glasses and thick white hair, draws in the assembled Columbia students and faculty with his detailed, lovingly-crafted presentation on W.E.B. Du Bois. Tears come to the speaker's eyes and to some in the audience as Aptheker concludes his talk with a discussion of the death of Dr. Du Bois. Aptheker does not reveal that he was prevented from attending the funeral service in Ghana in 1963 by the U.S. government. Aptheker was not issued a passport because of his affiliation with the Communist party.

This article serves as an introduction to two important essays. The first is W.E.B. Du Bois' 1944 autobiographical piece entitled "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom." The second is a copy of Aptheker's poetry—"W.E.B. Du Bois: Struggle not Despair"—which was presented at Columbia University in December 1988.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Herbert Aptheker for sharing his work and ideas. Any errors in fact or analysis, however, are the author's responsibility.

2. According to Aptheker (1988), Du Bois "thought people were like himself" in that he "never thought of making money [and] was singularly dedicated to service and truth."

3. According to Aptheker (Horne, 1986:345), "Under the terms of the McCarran Act, then still in force, it was a crime subject to ten years imprisonment for a Communist to have a passport."

4. Black scholars, sociological practitioners and others who accept clinical and applied sociology as legitimate areas for sociologists are more likely to consider Du Bois, without qualification, as an important sociologist. See, for instance, Fritz, 1985, 1988; Deegan, 1988.

5. According to Green and Driver (1978:39), "Important and valuable as [Du Bois'] contributions may be, historically or currently, Du Bois has not been accorded by early or later white sociologists the respect and recognition that he deserves. His continuous neglect by the sociological fraternity [hereafter meaning white sociologists only] until 1971 constitutes an interesting and perhaps instructive datum for the 'sociology of sociology.'"

6. Howard Odum (1951:378) mentions Du Bois a number of times within his volume on the development of American sociology. He refers to Du Bois as one who made "contributions to realistic sociology" and points to his "important role in sociology as a college and university discipline." Odum further states that between the periods of Du Bois' "notable work" at Atlanta University, he "contributed powerfully to what we have characterized elsewhere in this book as 'practical sociology.'" This praise for practical sociology may be put in some perspective when one realizes that Odum referred earlier in the book to several practitioners as "promising sociologists" but said they had chosen to work in "borderline sociology."

7. Sociology was not a separate discipline when Du Bois was at Harvard (Du Bois, 1944:40) from 1888 until 1891, but Du Bois took many social science courses and, in reviewing his background, has written that his "course of study would have been called sociology" (Du Bois, 1940:39).

8. Du Bois taught at Wilberforce University in Ohio from 1894 to 1896.

9. Du Bois went to the University of Pennsylvania as an assistant instructor in sociology (1896-97) to conduct a sociological study of the city's Negro population.

10. Du Bois went to Atlanta University in 1897 to teach history and economics, to found a department of sociology, and to take charge of the annual research conferences. He left in 1910, although he continued to edit the university conference reports for several years. Du Bois returned in the summer of 1933 to teach a course on Marx and the Negro which may have been the first course in the United States on Marx (Aptheker, 1990). He returned again in 1934 and remained until 1944.

11. This was the case with Saul Alinsky's work. An early (1934) Alinsky article—"A Sociological Technique in Clinical Criminology"—clearly identified Alinsky with the field. When Alinsky started to write about community organizing, however, the connection with the discipline was not easily made. Alinsky was not affiliated with a department of sociology, "sociology" was not in the titles of the publications and the writing did not clearly contain sociology jargon.

12. According to Aptheker (1973:558), "In the period of this book, [Du Bois] embraced a generally socialist outlook but with it went an attitude of opposition to the Communist party of the United States."

13. Shirley Graham Du Bois (1971:324) has referred to Aptheker as her husband's "close friend of long standing." Aptheker (1988, 1989c) says he "hesitate(s) to use the word 'friend'" when describing his relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois. "[Du Bois] was so distinguished [and] he was almost twice my age. I thought of him as a father."

14. Aptheker (1990) was a Peace and Freedom party candidate in 1966. (He invented the party's name when a reporter asked him for an affiliation.) While Aptheker lost this election, he joined—at the same time—a successful gerrymandering suit involving the district. A new district was created which allowed a black representative, Shirley Chisholm, to be selected in the next election. In 1976 Aptheker was a Communist party candidate in his unsuccessful senate race against Patrick Moynihan.

15. Aptheker (1990), in uniform and with his time in the Army coming to a close, visited the Columbia University campus in 1946. He talked with Professor William L. Westermann about a possible position with the university. He was told: "Aptheker, you belong on this campus—but Columbia will never hire a communist."

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