

## Pages 256-288 (W.E.B. Du Bois)

### Background

- Saw forces of white oppression as world-wide; wanted to understand racial dimensions of European colonization of Africa, Asia, India, and North America.
- Ignored by American sociologists in his day.
  - o Thus sociological theory is also a product of social and cultural dynamics.
- At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, racism precluded most social scientists from understanding race appropriately.
  - o Racial violence and tension widespread and increasing.
  - o Lynching became communal events by white citizens.
- He sought to investigate and explain racial issues sociologically.
  - o Sociological investigation would lead to solution to racism.
- Some deny his work in race relations because:
  - o Work is too empirical and theoretically narrow to make him a theorist
  - o Work is too subjective to be labeled a theory.
- Wrote in a peculiar style
  - o First person often; songs, poems, etc. about conditions blacks lived in
- Include his work because from marginalized group (like Gilman).

### Biographical Sketch

- Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868.
  - o Father was a restless, unhappy black man who abandoned the family.
  - o Mother was working hard just to make ends meet.
    - Suffered from stroke when he was a kid.
  - o Worked a lot as a child to help out mother; did well in school.
- As child saw the existence of the "color line", different from class-based inequality.
  - o Blacks must act in concert and organized efforts to win and exercise their freedom.
  - o In a racist society, democracy could not be colorblind.
- 1<sup>st</sup> black graduate from his high school
  - o Education would have ended but 4 white men took interest in him and agreed to pay for his college education at Fisk University (HBC) rather than Harvard.

- o He saw Fisk as “the tremendous yet unfulfilled potential of the entire black world that had been ‘held back by race prejudice and legal bonds, as well as by deep ignorance and dire poverty’” (260).
  - o Taught poor black schoolchildren in Tennessee.
- Transferred to Harvard in 1888 – received Master’s in 1892 in Philosophy.
- Then went to University of Berlin in Germany to introduce self to sociology.
  - o Met Max Weber; met with German Social Democratic party
- In Europe, he encountered white folks who showed little or no racial prejudice.
  - o Fully recognized that racism in the USA was only one example of racial subordination.
- Returned to US in 1894 when he ran out of funding
  - o Taught at Wilberforce University (HBC in Ohio) – finished doctoral thesis
- *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) = 1<sup>st</sup> sociological text on an African American community published in the United States.
- Believed careful sociological documentation combined with social and cultural understanding of a social group would make possible a cogent agenda of social reform.
- Him and his wife had a child, but that child died 18 months later from sewage pollution in the city’s water system.
  - o The wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*
- In 1897 → began teaching at Atlanta University until 1910
  - o Focused on political activism
  - o Founded “Niagara Movement” devoted to freedom of speech and criticism.
- In 1910, left and worked full time for NAACP in NYC
  - o Despite disapproval from white members, published journal *Crisis* which was a bit militant.
  - o Wrote several more books while still editor of *Crisis*.
  - o Harsh editorials created problems for the NAACP board, leading to power struggles.
- In 1934, took leave of absence from NAACP, returned to Atlanta University and became chair of sociology department.
  - o Shifted farther to the left politically.
- 1940s-1963 he wrote about the evils of colonialism and imperialism.
  - o Devotion to pan African movement
  - o Became a target in the Cold War – demanded to be named a foreigner
  - o Went through a trial and was acquitted, but stripped of passport.
- Invited to Ghana where he joined the Communist Party of the United States

- o Prevented from returning to the US
- o Forced to renounce American citizenship
- o March 1963 – became citizen of Ghana
- o Died 6 months later at 95 years old.

### **Intellectual Influences + Core Ideas**

- Concerned with the intersection of race and class
- Conducted 3 types of research
  - o Empirical studies looking at actual social conditions of African Americans
  - o Interpretive essays informed by historical research and personal experience
  - o Political essays focusing on pan-africanist and socialist solutions to inequality and racism.
- *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America*
  - o Criticizes US leaders for inability to check growing evil that led to Civil War.
- Also criticized the black community
  - o Insulted black parents for not sufficiently reinforcing the value of formal education
  - o Black church didn't help with moral decay.
- Studied less impoverished and oppressed African American communities too.
  - o Contacted black college graduates
  - o Believed that "the better classes of Negroes should recognize their duty toward the masses" (264).
- Sought to write about "ordinary" black people
  - o Revealed the elitism and ethnocentrism of the historical profession
- Refused to write neutrally even as he looked for the truth – but it was quite unheard of at his time.
  - o Today, well appreciated for being a man ahead of his time and not only for his sociological legacy in race and class but also his commitment to truth and justice.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

- Collectivist
  - o Primarily interested in examining how broad social and cultural patterns (class and racial stratification systems) shaped individual behavior and perceptions.