

REVIEW ARTICLE

Black Sociology in the Era of Black Lives Matter

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JOSÉ ITZIGSOHN AND KARIDA L. BROWN, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line*. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2020, 304 pages, ISBN 9781479856770. \$89.00.

EARL WRIGHT II, *Jim Crow Sociology: The Black and Southern Roots of American Sociology*. Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Press, 2020, 250 pages, ISBN 9781947602571. \$50.00.

In 1973, on the heels of the hard-fought gains of the Civil Rights Movement, sociologist and civil rights activist Joyce A. Ladner edited a collection titled *The Death of White Sociology: Essays on Race and Culture*. Bringing together an impressive set of Black writers and academics, the essays sought to make “an early statement on the development of Black sociology [...and] to examine some of the historical forces which have acted upon Black sociologists, and to explicate some of the issues which are central to this new discipline” (Ladner [1973] 1998, p. xxvii). For Ladner, as she wrote in her introduction, Black sociology must be distinct from mainstream (White) sociology in its expressly normative commitment to using social science to “eliminat[e] racism and systematic class oppression from the society [and...to] promot[e] the interests of the Black masses” (Ladner [1973] 1998, p. xxvii). Whereas mainstream sociological theories had long been used to justify the subordination of Black people, Black sociology was an emergent discipline that sought Black liberation.

Half a century after the publication of *The Death of White Sociology*, the United States is witnessing a renewed struggle for Black liberation. Everywhere we look—from the dismantling of affirmative action policies to voter suppression and gerrymandering—the gains of the Civil Rights Movement are under assault. And White supremacy is resurgent. Organizers in the nearly decade-long Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement have sounded the alarm, taking to the streets to force us to confront the continued reality of racism and

state-sanctioned violence against Black communities. The BLM movement has articulated trenchant critiques of the state, especially policing, and has advocated for myriad solutions to the state's manufactured and intersecting crises—from reforms of the criminal legal system to, especially in the summer of 2020, long-range visions that would bring about abolition democracy through a fundamental reimagining of our social contract.

Two recent books deepen our understanding of what Black sociology was, is, and could be in relation to contemporary struggles for justice and freedom in the United States and around the world. In *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line*, José Itzigsohn and Karida L. Brown provide a careful and comprehensive account of W. E. B. Du Bois's sociological oeuvre, revealing the present-day relevance of key Du Boisian concepts for sociological scholarship and activism. "A contemporary Du Boisian sociology is a critical project," Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) write, that "aims to use knowledge to make this world better for the oppressed" (p. 192). Any assessment of Black sociology would be incomplete without a deep understanding of Du Boisian theory and methods, but Black sociology has even more to offer. The call to use social scientific research in service of positive social change has motivated generations of Black sociologists, who have influenced and built on the prominent work of Du Bois in generative ways. In *Jim Crow Sociology: The Black and Southern Roots of American Sociology*, Earl Wright II sheds light on Black sociology's diverse and vast intellectual heritage. Through an analysis of Black sociologists working at Atlanta University, Fisk University, Tuskegee Institute, and Howard University in the early and mid-twentieth century, Wright broadens our view of Black sociology beyond Du Bois and suggests that a central distinction of the discipline is its "express purpose of obtaining data to understand, explain, and ameliorate problems impacting [the Black] community" (Wright 2020, p. 2). For Wright, Black sociology—its political commitments, institutional characteristics, and broader social impact—must be understood through the unique historical conditions of Jim Crow segregation, which bifurcated American sociology into two worlds (one Black and one White) and animated the intellectual and activist pursuits of Black sociologists incensed by Jim Crow injustices. Whereas Itzigsohn and Brown's book will likely leave readers hopeful about the possibilities of a revived Du Boisian (and Black) sociology to meet the crises of our times, Wright's book forces us to grapple with the sobering possibility that Black sociology has been in steady decline since the 1970s, contrary to Ladner's thesis that it was emergent at this time.

For several decades now, a growing number of sociologists have interrogated the classical sociological canon. In the United States, much of this effort has focused on revising the canon to acknowledge the foundational role that W. E. B. Du Bois and his students played in shaping the discipline in its earliest decades (Lemert 1994; Morris 2015; Wright 2002, 2016). Both books push this canonization effort forward, but they move us in two unique and important directions. Whereas Wright seeks to expand canonization beyond the addition of "superstar sociologists" like Du Bois (especially seeking the addition of those who are "female and LGBTQ" [Wright 2020, p. 12]), Itzigsohn and Brown seek to move the conversation away from simple canonization (of Du Bois or others) toward the fuller embodiment of Du Boisian sociological methods and theories—and, one could argue, Black sociological methods and theories—in contemporary scholarship.

Wright accomplishes his task by introducing readers to the research and scholarly lives of "little-known men and women" (Wright 2020, p. xx) working at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the early and mid-twentieth century. Chapters 2–5, which are the heart of the book, walk readers through the curricula and research outputs of the "big four" schools of Black sociology. Wright convincingly weaves biographical accounts with original archival analysis of speeches and departmental publications, giving fresh insight into the influential roles played by Du Bois (at Atlanta), Monroe Work (at Tuskegee), George Edmund Haynes (at Fisk), and Kelly Miller (at Howard) in

institutionalizing sociology at their respective universities. We also learn about the contributions of Black LGBTQ and women intellectuals like Augustus Granville Dill, who chaired the Department of Sociology at Atlanta University, and Sallie Hill Sawyer, a graduate of Fisk, who established a settlement house for Black women in Nashville where Fisk students engaged in “practical work in sociology” (Valien et al., 1950 as cited in Wright 2020, p. 127).

Black sociology in the early twentieth century was not a monolithic enterprise; each of the four schools, Wright shows us, had slightly different approaches to Black sociological practice. Wright defines Black sociology as a social science that “center[s] Blacks within non-deficit scientific investigations while, simultaneously, developing theories unique to understanding their situation and developing solutions to the problems identified” (Wright 2020, p. 186). While all four schools operated within this definition, sociologists at Fisk and Tuskegee engaged in applied sociological work in urban and rural communities, respectively, whereas Atlanta and Howard sought to develop more rigorous qualitative and quantitative approaches to social scientific investigation that would allow for the application of “broad and careful knowledge to the solving of the many intricate questions affecting their own people [...] through comprehension of the chief problems of wealth, work and wages; and at a fair knowledge of the objects and methods of social reform” (Atlanta University 1899 as cited in Wright 2020, p. 52).

Throughout the book, Wright insists that Black sociology in the early twentieth century was more rigorous than mainstream sociology of the time. His evidence is convincing. In Chapter 1, Wright traces sociology’s emergence in the United States to the South, where “a diverse array of Southern institutions embraced and expanded the instruction of sociology” (Wright 2020, p. 26). Contrary to the commonly accepted narrative that American sociology first developed in elite colleges and universities in the Midwest and Northeast, Wright tells of the expansion and function of sociology in the South in the period immediately after Reconstruction. For White colleges and universities, sociology was understood as a discipline that could lend a veneer of scientific legitimacy to racist policies and theories. “The discipline’s early embrace by southern [White] sociologists,” Wright argues, “was largely rooted in their attempts [...] to rationalize and promote racial segregation, racist policies, and scientific racism” (Wright 2020, p. 39). Sociological manuscripts written in the middle of the nineteenth century that justified slavery as a system for ensuring social order were taught at White Southern universities in the early 1900s. Contrary to their White Southern peers, Black sociologists at HBCUs began their analyses from the moral presumption that Black people deserved to be free and equal members of society. Instead of seeing the social conflict and terror of the Jim Crow South as a problem of too little social control of Black people, Black sociologists—marshalling multiple forms of empirical data and theory, unlike their White peers—indicted segregation and racism. In addition to carefully utilizing statistical methods to analyze survey and administrative data, Black sociologists developed innovative interpretive methods—such as “insider research”—to understand the experiences of subordinated people and communities. Unlike their White contemporaries publishing in the *American Journal of Sociology*, sociologists at Atlanta University routinely included methods sections in their publications, where they acknowledged the strengths and limitations of their data and analyses, as early as 1896 (Wright 2020, p. 59). Thus, we can see how Black sociology could be both unabashed in its political commitments to Black liberation and still more “objective,” paradoxically, than mainstream sociology.

For Wright, Black Sociology is a discipline that was birthed in, and reached its “apex” during, Jim Crow. Wright marks the “golden age of Black Sociology” as 1930–1962, a period when the big four HBCUs employed the most talented Black sociologists, offered expansive courses in sociology, and produced research that was increasingly being

recognized as valuable. The most influential Black sociologists at that time, such as Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier, worked at Fisk and Howard, respectively, but received recognition from mainstream sociological societies. Today, Wright argues, talented Black sociologists are more likely to train and work at elite, historically White colleges and universities (HWCUs) than HBCUs. “[O]nce the integration of higher education institutions began, most HBCUs lost their battles to attract top sociology talent,” Wright argues; therefore, integration “led to the decreased significance and impact of HBCUs on the discipline in general and the death of Black sociology as previously practiced and understood” (Wright 2020, p. 175). Contrary to Ladner, who saw the Civil Rights Movement as heralding the ascent of Black sociology, Wright sees the end of Jim Crow as ushering in the “dark age of Black sociology” (Wright 2020, p. 177). Wright also argues that despite its “death” within sociology, Black sociology served as “an academic building block of Black Studies” (Wright 2020, p. 186).

Wright’s argument is provocative and, perhaps, distressing, particularly for those who wish to see Black sociology thrive as an independent entity. It is lamentable that, even as they continue to produce necessary research and train important scholars, HBCUs no longer represent the “primary domain of Black sociological production” (Wright 2020, p. 187). And yet, the declining influence of sociology departments at HBCUs may not be the death knell of Black sociology that Wright suggests it is. By measuring Black sociology mainly along this one institutional criterion, we miss the vibrancy and revival of Black sociology elsewhere, especially in the BLM era when both academics and grassroots intellectuals have found Black sociological insights to be generative in envisioning radical social change (Clair and Woog, 2022; Kaba 2021; Purnell 2021). Black sociology’s strength can also be evaluated along other institutional criteria. Indeed, Wright acknowledges that the Association of Black Sociologists (ABS) is one remaining “institutional space where the principles of Black sociology continue” (Wright 2020, p. 187). Beyond ABS we can also see Black sociology’s continued—and even growing—presence in other institutions, like the pages of this journal (and others, including the newly formed *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*), the Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities of the American Sociological Association, and ad hoc but formal networks like the Du Boisian Scholar Network (Du Boisian Scholar Network 2019). And when we look beyond institutional spaces, we can see how Black sociology continues apace in other domains, including individual scholarship, scholar-activist praxis, teaching, and grassroots organizing.

Itzigsohn and Brown’s *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois* is evidence of Black sociology’s enduring promise. Their book is more than an exegesis of Du Bois’s sociological oeuvre. When read in conversation with Wright’s *Jim Crow Sociology*, we can better understand *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois* as a full-throated pronouncement that Du Boisian (and by extension, Black) sociology is the future. As Zandria Robinson (2018) has written, “History is an ellipse, and so we are cyclically occasioned with the opportunity to revisit where we’ve been, to ‘go back and get it’ as the Twi word ‘sankofa’ implores us” (p. xvi). Itzigsohn and Brown’s book is a revisiting of Du Bois that reflects, as much as it contributes to, the broader renaissance of Black sociology.

In their preface, Itzigsohn and Brown each recount the absence of Du Bois in their doctoral training in sociology departments at HWCUs. Itzigsohn tells us that he did not encounter Du Bois until his time as a postdoctoral fellow at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, which houses an impressive collection of Du Bois’s writings, photographs, audiotapes, and other memorabilia. Although Brown engaged with Du Bois in graduate school, her first encounter was not through her sociological training; rather, she came to read and know Du Bois through the Department of Africana Studies. Through independent study, she read Du Bois’s work alongside that of other twentieth century Black intellectuals, including Sylvia Wynter and Frantz Fanon. Brown’s experience lends support

to Wright's contention that Black sociology has resurfaced in Black Studies, even as, he argues, it falters elsewhere. And yet, the rest of Itzigsohn and Brown's book offers hope to those envisioning, seeking, and embodying a Black sociological revival in our time. Moreover, the publication of their book has already enabled—and will continue to encourage—sociology faculty, including myself, to train the next generation of sociologists to recognize the significance of Du Bois for the classical canon (see Green 2021).

Itzigsohn and Brown set out to accomplish two goals in their book: to clarify central concepts in Du Bois's sociology and to consider the present-day implications of Du Boisian sociology for researchers today. The book's four central chapters, Chapters 1–4, do just that, providing the reader with accessible summaries of Du Bois's central theoretical concepts across his body of work and offering reflections, at the end of each chapter, about what contemporary examinations in the tradition of Du Bois might look like. Chapter 1 distills Du Bois's phenomenological approach to studying and theorizing racialized subjectivity. Engaging mostly with Du Bois's thinking in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*, Itzigsohn and Brown connect concepts across Du Bois's writings—e.g., “double consciousness,” “the veil,” and “law and chance”—to articulate a coherent approach to describing and explaining subjectivity among Black people and White people and the frustrations of inter-racial interactions in the modern world. Throughout the chapter, they generatively compare Du Bois's phenomenological sociology to that of Erving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, and William H. Sewell, Jr.—mainstream (White) sociologists whose work has long been considered central to the discipline in the United States. In the final section of the chapter, which is titled “A Contemporary Du Boisian Sociology of Racialized Subjectivity,” they suggest a set of “methodological and analytic challenges” (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 57) that Du Bois's phenomenological approach offers contemporary sociology. Challenges include a rethinking of the purposes of ethnography, a recognition of the benefits of centering the subjectivities of the racially oppressed, and an assessment of the need to attend to specific historical conditions when building sociological theory. Their interpretations are likely to be generative for many sociologists seeking to bring Du Bois's critical insights into their own sub-fields (cf. Clair 2021).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 follow a similar structure as Chapter 1, walking readers through Du Bois's writings on racial and colonial capitalism, urban social problems, and public sociology, respectively. Many sociologists are, at least vaguely, aware of Du Bois's biographical and phenomenological writings in *The Souls of Black Folk* and his early urban sociological and statistical analyses in *The Philadelphia Negro*, but Du Bois's political, economic, and historical analyses in *Black Reconstruction in America* are less discussed within the discipline. In Chapter 2, we quickly learn why greater engagement with *Black Reconstruction* and with Du Bois's other writings on democracy, global capitalism, and labor exploitation is necessary. In particular, Du Bois's revisions to Marx are indispensable. For Du Bois, Marx missed the centrality of racism in structuring global capitalism. Du Bois scrutinized colonialism as a form of capitalism exported globally, resolving a dilemma facing many European and American capitalists: a need for labor that was more exploitable than the White working classes who, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were gaining some semblance of rights. Racism justified the violent and intense exploitation of peoples indigenous to the Global South and enabled the relative elevation of White workers. As Du Bois (2018 [1920]) writes in “The Souls of White Folk,”

It is plain to modern white civilization that the subjection of the white working classes cannot much longer be maintained [...] But there is a loophole. There is a chance for exploitation on an immense scale for inordinate profit, not simply to the very rich, but to the middle class and to the laborers. This chance lies in the exploitation of darker

peoples. It is here that the golden hand beckons. Here are no labor unions or votes or questioning onlookers or inconvenient consciences. These men may be used down to the very bone, and shot and maimed in ‘punitive’ expeditions when they revolt (p. 237).

In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois reveals how racism similarly explains the failures of working-class revolt and full democracy in the United States. During and after Reconstruction, White workers, instead of uniting with Black workers with whom they shared material interests, settled for the “psychological wages” accrued to their status as White. Contemporary American sociologists studying class and capitalism, Itzigsohn and Brown argue, would benefit from Du Bois’s example of examining how racism (and other forms of power) undergird class domination in the United States and around the world.

In the book’s final chapter, Itzigsohn and Brown make their case for a “contemporary Du Boisian sociology.” This chapter is a manifesto, in their words, for a sociology that “begins with Du Bois’s work but ultimately transcends it” (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 192). Whereas much of the book focuses on Du Bois’s contributions (though, at times, they surface the contributions of his long-sidelined contemporaries), Itzigsohn and Brown are careful, in this final chapter, to insist that a contemporary Du Boisian sociology must be a collective endeavor of “cooperation and solidarity” among a diverse range of sociologists engaging in anti-racist and liberatory scholarship in academia, public policy, and activist spaces. Moreover, much like Wright argues about Black sociology past, Du Boisian sociology present and future must hold certain political commitments even as it maintains its empirical rigor. Contemporary Du Boisian sociology is a “critical project that takes a strong position against racism, against colonialism in all its past and present forms, and against all forms of oppression and exclusion” (Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020, p. 191).

Ultimately, both *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois* and *Jim Crow Sociology* reveal the necessity and radical promise of a sociology that is guided by a deep care and respect for Black people and our freedom. Black sociology past and present remind us that we cannot fully, and should not aspire to, separate fundamental moral commitments to equal human dignity from empirical investigations of social life. Black sociology reminds us to pay special attention to the unique struggles, hopes, and joys of those occupying intersecting axes of oppression, such as Black women, Black queer people, disabled Black people, and working-class and poor Black people (see Luna and Pirtle, 2021). And Black sociology teaches us that the most rigorous knowledge useful for positive social change is often produced through collective efforts of co-creation within and beyond the academy. Both books, hitting the shelves in 2020, are in dialogue with the continual BLM activism that presaged the upsurge of abolitionist protest that summer. As Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, “Social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (Kelley 2002, p. 8). Always in conversation with the liberation movements of its time, Black sociology has been, is, and will continue to be bright.

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