

Robert B. Owens

Aldon Morris, "The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology." Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, xxvii + 282 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/83896)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2016

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Book Review

Aldon Morris, “The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology.” Oakland: University of California Press, 2015, xxvii + 282 pp.

doi: 10.2383/83896

Aldon Morris’s *Scholar Denied* is a narrative of W.E.B. Du Bois’s role as an intellectual and organizational leader in the first generation of American sociologists. The book speaks to the history of sociology, the sociology of intellectuals and the sociology of race. It also touches on the philosophical content of Du Bois’s thought and the cultural and social history of his time. The single, focal argument of the book that ties these several topics and themes together is that Du Bois developed a scientific sociology, that he was the first person in the United States to do so and that a school composed of students conducting empirical work developed around him at Atlanta University. This argument is pitched against the “broad consensus” that the “Chicago school” was the originator of empirical and scientific sociology in the United States [p. 1], and the disjunction between this view and Morris’s own is the basis for his second, closely linked thesis: Du Bois’s work was deliberately marginalized for racist reasons by the Chicago sociologists, their funders and institutional supporters and their ideological allies (most centrally Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute, Robert Park’s one-time employer). A third thesis, developed in the final two chapters of the book, is that the Du Bois-Atlanta school not only flourished in its local and temporally-bound environment, but also had a major impact on the development of American sociology in the twentieth century [pp. 168ff.].

Morris has done a great service to historians of sociology by compiling the archival data he has about Du Bois’s extraordinary career, which flourished on an individual level and an institutional level against long odds. Different readers may find different points in the book’s historical narrative to be particularly arresting or disruptive of their prior understandings. Naturally, the lesson hits me most forcefully at a point where it has clear links to my own research. In an effort to survey all of the invocations of the term “laboratory” in early American sociology [Owens 2014], I missed the fact that Du Bois referred to his Atlanta-based research operation as a “sociological laboratory,” and I missed several recent articles examining the work of that so-called laboratory [Wright 2002a; 2002b; 2008; 2009]. It is of course humbling to discover a blind spot in my own work, and I am grateful to Morris for calling attention to historical innovations that I overlooked. More importantly, my failure to find these sources in the first place is a neat demonstration that the history of sociology and the sociology of intellectuals are liable to inherit in the present the biases of the past. Morris’s reference list and the archival sources he has brought into print will provide important guidance for future researchers who want to overcome those biases.

Morris’s central thesis – that Du Bois founded the first scientific school of sociology in the United States – is deceptively complex. Morris is in fact making multiple claims on behalf of Du Bois, with stronger conceptual and evidentiary grounding for some than for others. According to Morris, Du Bois was an *institutional* founder of a scholarly community in Atlanta, and he was the originator of *ideas* that were taken up by students

and peers (including Max Weber and several members of the Chicago school) and have stood the test of time in the modern discipline of sociology. The argument for priority – that Du Bois founded the *first* scientific school of sociology in the United States – seems to rest on a conjunction of the institutional and the discursive founding claims. Morris acknowledges the social survey research that predated *The Philadelphia Negro* [1899], most notably the *Hull House Maps and Papers* [1895] and (outside the U.S.) Charles Booth’s *Life and Labour of the People in London* [1889–1903]. He also acknowledges that the University of Chicago, University of Kansas and Columbia University all established departments of sociology, and Chicago a journal, in the years immediately before Du Bois’s first publication in 1896 and his arrival at Atlanta University in 1897. But the social survey movement authors did not develop the other institutional trappings of a professional discipline; hence they fail the institutional founding test. Neither Chicago nor Columbia produced research that proved to have enduring relevance to sociology until after Du Bois’s *Philadelphia Negro* [1899] and *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] had appeared in print; hence they fail the discursive founding test. As to what it means to call Du Bois’s and his students’ sociology “scientific,” Morris reports favorably on a few features of their work: their methodological pluralism, their methodological rigor in survey design (particularly Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro*) and their privileging of empirical work over deductive theorizing.

These overlapping claims come out in the details of the book, but nuances between them are easy to overlook, bracketed as they are by Morris’s frequently repeated and blunt refrain that Du Bois “buil[t] America’s first school of scientific sociology” [quote from p. 74; see also pp. 1, 143, 168, 195].

The claim that Du Bois’s school was *scientific* means less than Morris seems to want it to mean. There was no consensus then, nor is there settled consensus now, about what it would mean for social science to be “scientific.” Du Bois was a pioneer of mapping and surveying methods in the *Philadelphia Negro* and an early adopter of statistical methods in his doctoral work in Germany, but he was not in the vanguard of positivist “scientism.” Nor were empirical fact gathering and measurement the only ways of knowing that he proposed for sociology to adopt. Much like Max Weber, Du Bois identified himself as a sociologist at a time when the disciplinary identity of sociology had few if any stable features, and he put together a vision for what the new discipline could be that drew from an eclectic range of intellectual resources – not only new techniques of measurement but also history, philosophy and the currents of literary and allegorical argument that are prominent in *The Souls of Black Folk*. There seems to be a missed opportunity in Morris’s book to tell a story that is at once more complex, more clearly historically situated and more revelatory for contemporary readers in sociology. Du Bois’s sociology was not straightforwardly “scientific” on any given interpretation of that term, and his vision of the discipline was further from what we have today than Morris lets on. It might be that we have even more to learn from it than Morris suggests.

The claim that Du Bois’s school was *first* in a discursive sense – as opposed to an institutional sense – is something of a distraction in *The Scholar Denied*. If we describe him as the originator of important ideas that still have currency in sociology today, then we view Du Bois’s work through the distorting lens of what happened later. Du Bois

doesn't need this kind of help from us to establish the originality or the importance of his ideas, but in places Morris relies very heavily on the distorting lens. The clearest example is his sustained argument that Du Bois developed a "constructivist" theory of race at a time when essentialist biological theories of race were dominant [pp. 29-45]. Here he is swimming upstream against the arguments of Anthony Appiah and Robert Gooding-Williams, major philosophical interpreters of Du Bois, and the effort is not totally convincing. To get to his conclusion, Morris urges us that we must not "unwittingly blame Du Bois for not using social constructionist language that had not been invented" [p. 30]. That is quite right. But nor does it make any sense to *credit* Du Bois for intending to make arguments that he did not in fact make, just because we can retrospectively trace a line of discursive development from present-day constructivist arguments backwards to Du Bois. Morris sometimes seems to lapse into that conceptual confusion in his exploration of the foundations of Du Bois's views of race.

The link between Morris's evidence and his claims is also sometimes tenuous when it comes to his reconstructions of the theories of race and the personal motivations of the other central figures in the book. Robert Park comes in for especially harsh treatment in both respects. Morris is persuasive that Park failed to acknowledge the power of Du Bois's scholarship or the extent of his influence over Park's own work, thereby contributing to Du Bois's marginalization in the discipline, to Park's discredit and to the enduring impoverishment of sociology. This is most vividly clear in the exclusion of any Du Bois writings from Park and Burgess's influential textbook, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, and in Park's failure to acknowledge Du Bois's influence over his essay on the "marginal man" [pp. 145-147]. But the evidence for Park's personal animosity towards Du Bois and his general racial animus is much less clear.

We are told that Park adopted from Washington the view that blacks "were a primitive people lacking the advanced civilization possessed by American whites" [p. 102]. But the only quote provided as support for this position (Park in a letter to Washington) shows Park observing a *commonality* between civilization of "the Negro" and southern whites. Park writes: "The Negro has risen in the scale of civilization to the point where he kept slaves. So far as I know the Negro is the only savage people who has done so. A system of government based on slavery is essentially higher than one based on the mere tribal or family relation. The Southerner will appreciate that" [p. 102]. Similarly, Park's observation that the southern racial caste system created a "solution" to the "race problem" [p. 157, quote from Park] is taken as evidence that Park saw that caste system "as the source of black liberation" [p. 157, quote from Morris]. To say that the caste system functioned to create an orderly society does not entail the belief that it created a free society or a morally acceptable one. Morris makes a large and unjustified inferential leap in attributing the latter view to Park. In yet another instance, Morris reports that Park "exposed his own children to Plato, Shakespeare, and Homer," while "in Park's eyes, what was cultural nourishment for white children was a waste of time for black children toiling on southern plantations" [p. 115]. In the associated endnote we get a report (from another secondary source) that Park found "the Negro students... responded best to the great Western myths [...] like the *Illiad*, *Odyssey*, and tales of King Arthur" [p. 238]. Perhaps Park did believe that Plato and Shakespeare were beyond the possible understanding of black children. But the appearance of Homer in both positions here is

jarring, and it undermines this reader's trust in the broad sweep of Morris's claim about Park's views on pedagogy and race.

In Morris's account Park's personal feelings towards Du Bois are bound tightly to Booker T. Washington's, but the evidence Morris cites implicates Washington far more than Park. A letter written by Washington to his secretary is held up as evidence of "Park's support of [Washington's stance]" that Du Bois was an "arrogant snob" because it concludes with the line, "I wish you would let Dr. Park read this" [p. 105]. There is no direct affirmation here, or anywhere else in the book, of what Park thought about the subject matter of Washington's letter. A personal diary entry where Park states that Du Bois "hid in a country farmhouse" during a race riot in Atlanta is held up as evidence that Park launched a "smear campaign against Du Bois" [p. 106]. Washington's later *public* comments to discredit Du Bois come through clearly [p. 106]. But to argue that Park's private diary entry was a deliberate smear (as opposed to an error of fact) *and* that the private diary entry is evidence of the start of a public campaign, is at the very least ungenerous to Park.

With respect to Max Weber, Morris likewise identifies intentions and intellectual commitments that go beyond what the evidence in the book will support. Morris argues that Du Bois's view of race deeply influenced Weber, to the point that Weber – a one-time purveyor of obviously bigoted and biologically essentialist comments about the Poles [p. 154] – came to view the contemporary sociology of race in the United States and Germany as "useless because its nonsociological approach emphasized biology as a crucial determinant of racial dynamics" [p. 156]. The evidence here is a letter from Weber to Du Bois. It reads: "we have to meet to-day in Germany not only the dilettantic litterature [*sic*] [...] but a 'scientific' race-theory, built up on purely anthropological fundaments, too, – and so we have to accentuate especially those connections and the influence of social-economic conditions upon the relations of races to each other [...] I should be very glad if you would find yourself in a position to give us, for our periodical, an essay about that object" [p. 156, quote from Weber].¹

Weber's disdain for most extant writing on race comes through clearly in the letter, as does his admiration for Du Bois's innovations. But the notion that Weber would reject any theory that treated biology as "a crucial determinant" of race relations does not. Weber's objection to "purely anthropological fundaments" for a theory of race appears to be a rejection of an excessively individualist conception of how racial identities manifest, in favor of theory attentive to the social and economic setting of race relations. Thus Weber recognized that racial typologies were fatally compromised by the prevalence of interracial breeding even in deeply racist societies [p. 161], and he scoffed at the motivated reasoning of segregationists that separation of the races was necessary because "whites instinctively disliked the odor of black people" [p. 162]. But these positions do not clearly translate into a rejection by Weber of any causal force for biology in race relations. Morris acknowledges that Weber "occasionally slipped into racialized thinking throughout his career" [p. 163], and even so he does not seriously consider

¹ Morris cites Zimmerman [2006] and Scaff [2011] as sources. Weber's vivid comments about Polish physical and mental inferiority date from 1893 and 1895 [Zimmerman 2006, 61-63]. The letter to Du Bois cited above dates from 1904 [Scaff 2011, 257].

alternative ways to make sense of Weber's views on race. Weber's biographer Joachim Radkau, for instance, sees Weber's attacks on German race theory as "mainly a struggle against epistemological naivety and presumptuousness" [Radkau 2009, 340] – hence a *negative* argument, rather than the *positive* and radically constructivist sociology of race that Morris identifies with Du Bois and the later Weber.

I have spent several paragraphs on narrowly focused textual criticisms in order to reach a single argument that ties them together. Morris's book is organized around an interpretive narrative that is over-simplified in crucial junctures and anchored to present day disciplinary concerns in a way that distorts the views and likely motivations of the historical figures he discusses. The upshot for the reader is that it sometimes seems most fruitful to read the evidence compiled in the book somewhat against the grain of Morris's interpretive claims.

The claim that Du Bois was an institutional founder of a creative and productive research community at Atlanta University stands up well to scrutiny. This argument by Morris is important for the sociology of intellectuals as well as the history of sociology, and he effectively leverages the example of the Du Bois-Atlanta school as a criticism of Collins's [1998] sociology of intellectuals – in particular Collins's claims about the importance of material resources in facilitating intellectual production [p. 174].

It is also clear beyond doubt that Du Bois was a scholar denied in various ways because of his race and the racism of the society in which he lived. The core elements of this story are not new: Du Bois was passed over for faculty appointments at the major research universities despite an unimpeachable record of scholarly brilliance and productivity; Booker T. Washington and Du Bois were intellectual and political antagonists; Washington found many powerful white allies and boosters for whom his ideas about "compromise" between the races were ideologically convenient.

Morris adds important new details to our understanding of Du Bois's marginalization. He locates telling instances where Du Bois's ideas seemed to find their way into the work of Chicago sociologists without explicit citation, and he details Washington's role in blocking funding for Du Bois's Atlanta University-based research work [pp. 98-99]. In the final chapter, Morris shows that when the Carnegie Foundation decided to fund a comprehensive study of race in American society, they passed over the opportunity to fund the *Encyclopedia of the Negro*, a project on which Du Bois had been appointed editor-in-chief in 1934, in favor of funding a team led by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal for the research that would produce *An American Dilemma* [1944, 198-208]. The funding negotiations and committee meetings that Morris recounts, in which Du Bois's ability to be objective in studying race was repeatedly questioned, cast the foundation leaders and several of the social scientists working on the *Encyclopedia* project in a clear and ugly light. On the other hand, Morris reaches well beyond what his evidence will support when he treats Robert Park as little more than a vessel for the expression and enactment of the worst impulses of his structurally racist society. He does the same when he treats Washington's personal attitude towards Du Bois as an effective stand-in for Park's.

As for Du Bois's own ideas, Morris's biggest contribution may be his chronicling of the intellectual relationship between Du Bois and Weber, building on Lawrence Scaff's recent study of Weber's travels in America [2011]. Morris is persuasive that Weber saw Du Bois as a peer and not a mentee. The role that their relationship may have played in

shaping Weber's sociology of race is an immensely interesting question. In addition to the letter quoted above, Morris cites at length from a debate between Weber and Alfred Ploetz where Weber insists on greater conceptual refinement and evidentiary support than Ploetz is able to provide for his views of race [pp. 160-163]. These passages present Weber as a demanding and critical thinker about race who was as enthusiastic about Du Bois's approach to the topic as he was disdainful of conceptually muddled or politically motivated reasoning. But the notion that Weber underwent a complete conversion in his understanding of race after meeting Du Bois and reading his work strains credulity, as does the notion that Du Bois managed to transcend all vestiges of biological essentialism in his own thinking about race.

Finally, Morris's claim for Du Bois's status as a discursive founder of scientific sociology flattens and distorts both Du Bois's intellectual originality and the historical setting in which he worked. Morris writes somewhat disparagingly of the many monographs in the history of sociology wherein "the major sociological players, who are argued to have founded the new discipline, are placed on stage, with the authors making cases for why their favorite sociologist was a major founder" [p. 141]. Morris's rebuke to these accounts for their inattention to Du Bois is justifiable, but his book is nonetheless clearly a contribution to the same genre. He challenges the premise that sociology originated at elite and white-dominated institutions among white scholars, and he has broadcast to a wide audience a range of empirical materials that many historians of sociology, including me, have too easily overlooked in the past. But Morris leaves in place the conceptually dubious premise that it is a worthwhile project to launch a search for sociology's discursive founder(s) in the first place.

The Scholar Denied is an important contribution to the history of sociology, although on the basis of the raw material compiled, a better book would have been possible.

Robert B. Owens
University of Chicago

References

- Collins, R.
1998 *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Owens, B.R.
2014 "'Laboratory Talk' in U.S. Sociology, 1890-1930: The Performance of Scientific Legitimacy." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 50(3): 302-320.
- Radkau, J.
2009 *Max Weber: A Biography*. [Translated by Patrick Camiller]. Cambridge: Polity.
- Scaff, L.
2011 *Max Weber in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wright, E.

2002a "The Atlanta Sociological Laboratory, 1896-1924: A Historical Account of the First American School of Sociology." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 26(3): 165-174.

2002b "Why Black People Tend to Shout! An Earnest Attempt to Explain the Sociological Negation of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory Despite Its Possible Unpleasantness." *Sociological Spectrum* 22(3): 325-361.

2008 "Deferred Legacy! The Continued Marginalization of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory." *Sociology Compass* 2(1): 195-207.

2009 "Beyond W.E.B. Du Bois: A Note on Some of the Lesser Known Members of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory." *Sociological Spectrum* 29(6): 700-717.

Zimmerman, A.

2006 "Decolonizing Weber." *Postcolonial Studies* 9(1): 53-79.