

In an unpublished article from 1895, which you can read in the digital archives of the Du Bois Papers at Amherst, Du Bois describes his experiences of travelling alone in a continental railway carriage in Europe. He describes how he has grown used to strangers staring at him with curiosity, and asking questions about his origins. They generally assume English is not his native tongue, ask if he is from India, Spain, Arabia, or South America, and react with incredulity when he tells them his family has lived in the United States for generations. Then Du Bois tells the stranger, “I am of Negro descent.” He describes the stranger’s reaction as follows:

“In this manner, it gradually dawns upon my inquisitive friend that he is face to face with a modern ‘problem’. He recollects the emancipation of several millions of slaves in the United States some years ago, and he has since heard more or less of the trouble which naturally followed with this horde of partially civilized freedmen... Yet he is interested, for here, says he, is a young man whose very existence is a social paradox: removed but a couple of generations from barbarism, he is yet no barbarian; and again though to all appearances the civilized member of a civilized state, he represents the 19<sup>th</sup> century problem of barbarism... Yes, I tell him, I am one of those nine million human beings in the United States, who constitute the so-called ‘Negro Problem’.”

This was written when Du Bois was 27 years old, and probably depicts experiences he had during his two years spent studying in Germany from 1892 to 1894. This article, which Du Bois wrote in full but did not publish, reveals a few things about the social and political world around Du Bois, and how he fit into this world. Firstly, it tells us that the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, referred to here as “the emancipation of several million slaves in the United States some years ago,” brought with it a world-famous social and political problem of how this new population of free people were going to be accommodated in the white-dominated United States. It tells us that the discourse surrounding this problem related most significantly to the degree of barbarism and civilization of African-descended people. The question on everyone’s tongue was not, What accommodations should we make to ensure this oppressed group succeed? It revolved around racist assumptions of the biologically-based mental and cultural inferiority of Black people, and the question of how such people, assumed to be lacking the ability to succeed or thrive in the civilized world, were going to be managed or dealt with by the society whose burden they had now become. This was called at the time, “The Negro Problem.”

The unpublished article also reveals a few things about Du Bois’ place in this social “problem.” His very existence he tells us, is considered “a social paradox.” “To all appearances the civilized member of a civilized state,” as he says, Du Bois was certainly a living contradiction of the assumptions made by white people not only in America, but in Europe as well, of the lack of any self-civilizing capacity inhering in African-descended human beings. Although he was born in 1868, a mere five years after

the Emancipation Proclamation, Du Bois' mother had the advantage of being from a long-freed Black landowning population in the Eastern state of Massachusetts. He grew up in a mostly white town, which lacked the segregation commonly experienced by Black Americans. He attended Fisk University in Tennessee as a young man, eventually becoming the first African American to obtain a doctoral degree from Harvard. By all measures, his background, his opportunities, and his abilities, Du Bois was exceptional.

But more interestingly, this passage also tells us about how Du Bois viewed himself in this historical and social context. He mentions here that he “*represents* the 19<sup>th</sup> century problem of barbarism.” Representation was a duty Du Bois took seriously. Two years earlier, in a diary entry on his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, he expressed his desire to show the world, through his own achievements, what Black people were capable of. He says, “These are my plans! To make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race.”

Du Bois did end up making a name for himself in social science and in literature, and in addition his scientific and literary work was devoted to addressing the struggles experienced by Black people in America at the hands of white racism.

We've covered the evolutionary theories of culture in previous weeks. The consensus among 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists was that human beings evolved biologically along a linear scale, from extremely primitive races (among which were included Africans and African Americans) to the evolutionarily advanced white people of northern Europe. Now, culture was considered a manifestation of biology. The two were inseparable, and evolved hand in hand. So not only did human beings evolve along a linear biological scale, from primitive to advanced biological specimens, but the manifestations of culture also evolved along a linear scale in line with biological advancements. People at the time viewed African civilization as, well, not civilizations at all. And they viewed European nations, as well as the white-dominated United States, as the epitome of civilized humanity. What this meant was that it was an open question, as far as they were concerned, whether Black Americans would be capable of civilizing themselves now that they were free. They had retained their African biology and it was expected that they would retain their African cultural capacities.

What this resulted in was that these racist generalizations, both biological racism concerning Black bodies and cultural racism concerning African culture, were used to justify the ongoing exploitation of free Black Americans. Although Black people were technically free, they still faced a great deal of racism, poverty, lack of opportunities, white terrorism like lynchings and racially motivated riots, exploitation by white-owned industrialists, and much more. In cases where Black people failed to

significantly rise in society as a result of these severe adverse conditions, it was very easy for the powerful white majority to shrug their shoulders and say, “Well, it just goes to show that Black people really are incapable of becoming civilized, and of thriving in the civilized world.”

On the occasions that Black people did achieve success, they were often met with violence and white supremacist terrorism. This terrorism was then also justified using the racist generalizations of the scientific consensus. We see this in the Wilmington race riots of 1898, which were the subject of some of our readings this week.

The Wilmington Affair was a white supremacist insurrection, in which a militia composed of white citizens of the predominantly Black town of Wilmington, North Carolina, overthrew the city’s elected government. The reason for this insurrection was that the majority Black population, now able to vote, had shifted the political representation of the city and prominent Black citizens had entered its other governing institutions. Three city aldermen were Black; there were Black court clerks, police officers, coroners, and magistrates. The white minority in the town responded by taking back political power using violent force, ejected city officials, and imposed subsequent barriers to the voting rights of Black citizens.

In an article published in a national journal called *The Forum*, Henry Litchfield West, a northern journalist, justified the violent overthrow of democratic governance using the logic of the white insurgents: He said that the Black majority population had acquired political power and representation, but they were unfit for the positions they filled, being “ignorant, incapable, and a travesty upon good administration” 581. With this new power, they had also grown “insolent and bold” 582. The insurrection was simply a desire to rid themselves of bad government.

To quote his article,

“The white citizens of Wilmington, who for nearly two years had endured an intolerable condition of affairs with admirable patience, declined to await the slow progress of reform.” 583

“While the Negro continues shiftless, ignorant, superstitious, and incompetent, there is a justification for the refusal to give him absolute control over invested capital, commercial interests, and municipal matters.” 590

Du Bois objected to this kind of lazy and unempirical justification of racism and racially-motivated violence, justifications he frequently witnessed in white society. In an unpublished article from 1899, which you can read in the Du Bois Digital Archives, he responded to West’s article in the forum, saying:

“It is only by careful and intensive study of actual conditions in the south that we can hope to arrive at right conclusions. When such a catastrophe as the Wilmington riot takes place we must not be content to let it pass without such careful investigation as shall put us in possession of the real

causes of the trouble. It is not enough for us to lay the fault at the door of ignorance or politics or prejudice—rather this gives an occasion of analyzing and measuring such vague terms. There is grave danger in the negro problem, not so much from the presence and condition of the negroes and the attitude of the whites as from the fact that the mass of the nation refuses to take the trouble to understand these conditions and this attitude. They are too apt to be content with such hasty and ill-considered conclusions as a young reporter recently published in the Forum in an account of the Wilmington affair. The burden of the article in question was that the Wilmington negro had made practically no advancement since slavery and that this mass of ignorance and sloth sought to rule the wealth and intelligence of a large city; hence the revolt...The interesting question then arises what is the real condition of the negroes in Wilmington?”

And Du Bois goes on to list some statistics, including the number of Black inhabitants, the value of property in the hands of Black people, the number of Black churches and the value of those buildings, the capital of a Black building association, and the number of merchants and professionals.

It was racist and unempirical generalizations about the incompetence of Black people, here employed against the victims of white supremacy in Wilmington, which turned Du Bois towards the scientific study of society. As I briefly mentioned, Du Bois spent two years studying in Germany, but equally important as where he studies is what he learned there. In Germany, he learned the school of economics which, rather than appealing to law-like generalizations of human behavior, emphasized environmental factors, historical developments, and human agency. Importantly, he learned from this school to base his conclusions on empirical findings, rather than highly abstract generalization invented from the armchair. He was educated in statistics, which was incredibly rare for americans at that time, especially with regard to the study of society. And he brought all these skills back to the United States, determined to utilize them in service of overturning ignorant and unsupported assumptions about “the negro problem.”

This unpublished article was probably written the same year he published his first and groundbreaking empirical study of scientific sociology, *The Philadelphia Negro*. This was a study of an urban Black population living in philadelphia’s 7<sup>th</sup> ward. As Aldon Morris explains in his chapter on our reading list, *The Philadelphia Negro* used several groundbreaking methods that were totally new at the time. These included:

- Extensive interviews,
- Surveys
- Archival data
- Participant observation
- And cross referencing quantitative with qualitative data, or what’s known as triangulation.

In this book, Du Bois showed through close and detailed empirical study that the economic and social outcomes for Black people were the same or similar to those of European immigrants living in the same conditions. His study took into account the relevance of:

- Class differences among Black populations, and
- Gender differences, as he included an extensive report by Isabel Eaton on domestic workers, who were mostly women.

He presented crime as rooted in social problems instead of the natural result of low levels of civilization. He examined the role of the church. He considered the relevance of migration patterns out of the 7<sup>th</sup> ward by families who became wealthier, to be replaced by newcomers from the south. And he considered the relevance of spatial dimensions of city segregation and how this impacted interactive possibilities.

*The Philadelphia Negro* was influenced by the Hull House publication we learned about a few weeks back, *Hull House Maps and Papers*. Isabel Eaton, who co-authored *The Philadelphia Negro*, was a settlement worker at Hull House before she went to work with Du Bois, and had written a chapter for *Hull House Maps and Papers*. And Du Bois' connections with the women-dominated settlement movement went beyond this influence. Just like the white women conducting sociology in settlement houses, Du Bois was shut out of academic employment opportunities in universities. In some senses, his exclusion was much worse, since few white male sociologists wanted to collaborate with a Black person on studies about Black people. In contrast, Jane Addams and the women at Hull House collaborated extensively with the first generation of sociologists at the University of Chicago.

Du Bois did manage to secure a professorship teaching sociology at Atlanta University in 1897, after he had completed but not published *The Philadelphia Negro*. This was a predominantly Black university with a smattering of white students who were not segregated but studied among each other. This university lacked money, however, partly because the state of Georgia withheld funds from them for refusing to segregate their students.

It was in Atlanta that Du Bois founded what Aldon Morris calls The Du Bois-Atlanta School of Sociology—a tradition, society, and school of sociology which rarely makes it into official histories of sociology. Du Bois published a number of celebrated works after *The Philadelphia Negro*, including *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Black North*, and *The Negroes of Farmville*. And they used methods very similar to those famously used by the Chicago School of Sociology two decades later—by sociologists who seemed to remain conveniently ignorant of Du Bois' earlier work, as later chapters of Morris' work show. This later Chicago School is often credited with being the originator of this scientific model of research. Statements made even today, claiming that the 1918 study by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, is the foundational text in empirical sociology eclipse Du Bois' extensive and innovative work (as well as Addams and the women at Hull House).

Nevertheless, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Du Bois' Atlanta school became well known among certain scholars for its determination to utilize scientific social investigation to demonstrate the social and economic phenomena responsible for Black people's struggles. At the time, Du Bois' was a radical undertaking since it contradicted comfortable narratives justifying white complacency in the face of racial inequality. In a letter to the economist Walter Wilcox, Du Bois criticized him for not only his racism, but his lack of scientific rigor, saying:

“The fundamental difficulty in your position is that you are trying to show an evaluation of the Negro problem—only from inside your office. It can never be done. You have simply no adequate conception of the Negro problem in the south and of Negro character and capacity. When you have sat as I have ten years in intimate soul contact with all kinds and conditions of Black men you will be less agnostic. I have my prejudices but they are backed by knowledge if not supported... If you must [go] on writing about and promising judgment on this problem why not study it? Not from a car-window and assembled dispatches as in your pamphlet on crime but get down here and really study it at first hand.”

He included several references in his works to his aims and philosophy of social scientific truth used in the service of exposing racist ideas as unfounded and pushing for social reform. In the preface to *The Negro-American Artisan*, he wrote:

“There is only one sure basis of social reform and that is Truth—a careful, detailed knowledge of the essential facts of each social problem. Without this there is no logical starting place for reform and uplift. Social difficulties may be clear and we may inveigh against them, but the causes proximate and remote are seldom clear to the casual observer and usually are quite hidden from the man who suffers from, or is sensitive to, the results of the snarl. To no set of problems are these truths more applicable than to the so-called Negro problems. Perhaps the most immediate of these problems is the problem of work. To many superficial men the problem is simple: *The Negro is lazy; make him work*. Hence peonage, vagrancy laws and the like. To other men, broader minded, but unacquainted with the facts, the matter, while not simple, is clear: *Negroes have a childish ambition to do work for which they are not fitted. Let us train them to do work for which they are fitted*. This study is an attempt to get at the facts underlying such widespread thot as this by making a study of the trained Negro laborer, his education, opportunity, wages, and work.”

This second narrative he mentions—of Black people having a childish ambition to do work they were incapable of—is perhaps in reference to Booker T Washington's famous Conservatism. Booker T Washington, though also an African-American man and a collaborator of Du Bois', had a very different perspective than he did on how to integrate Black people into free American society. Washington argued that Black people were best suited for manual labor, since they were not yet civilized enough to undertake intellectual or professional work. He encouraged the mass education of Black populations in industrial work, so they could earn a good living and work their way up over generations towards equality with whites. This narrative and approach appealed much more to white people than did Du Bois' narrative and approach, which sought to disprove the notion that Black

people were being held down by anything other than injustice and ignorant racism perpetrated by whites.

Unsurprisingly, Black scholars and aspiring scholars were attracted to Du Bois' version of sociology because it promised to disprove the racist assumptions being used to keep their people down using scientific knowledge, and it therefore held a promise of Black liberation. Du Bois trained a generation of Black sociologists, including:

- Richard R. Wright Jr.
- Monroe Work
- George Edmund Haynes

On a side note, since history's main purpose is to enable intelligent reflection on the present by throwing into relief its relationship with the past, we can ask ourselves what it means that versions of this racist argument concerning Black people's cultural inferiority and their own responsibility for their ongoing struggles for economic, political, and social equality, are still used today. Du Bois appeared to believe, or at least hope, that a scientific demonstration of the equality of Black people in terms of their biological and cultural capacities, would constitute a major stride towards the liberation of Black people from racist treatment. Did this materialize? Perhaps it did, but to what extent? What does this tell us about the relevance of scientific truth for structuring a population's political beliefs? What does it tell us about the complacency of the powerful, and the desire for easy justifications for the status quo, that a modified version of this 19<sup>th</sup> century argument, now scientifically disproved, is still used in some circles today? Of course, it's a modified version. People no longer say that it's African biology or cranial features that are responsible, but the explanation that racial inequality is not due to societal conditions, but due to group cultural failures, is still very much intact. That's perhaps a conversation you can have with your colleague, or friends, or family.

In any case, the hope that these talented Black scholars had as they flocked to Atlanta University, that by scientifically proving the social and environmental causes of Black people's problems, they would move towards liberation, fell short, as demonstrated by the decades of Jim Crow laws that followed.

Du Bois also mentored a host of white scholars, including the settlement worker Mary White Ovington, who would later co-found the NAACP with Du Bois, and Isabel Eaton, who received a Master's degree from Columbia for the work she conducted for *The Philadelphia Negro*.

As part of his influential Atlanta School of Sociology, Du Bois held annual conferences, to which he invited a variety of academic and political figures, including:

- The educator and orator Booker T Washington,
- His mentees, sociologists Richard R. Wright and Monroe Work,
- The Georgia governor, Allen D Candler,
- The president of Harvard, Charles William Elliot,

- A host of settlement workers, including Mary White Ovington, and Hull House residents Jane Addams, Sophia Beckenridge, and Florence Kelley,
- And the anthropologist Franz Boas, whose work on race and culture we'll be looking at next week.

Franz Boas' commencement address at the Atlanta Conference in 1906 made a huge impact on Du Bois, as evidenced by his later recollection from 1939. He says,

"I remember my own rather sudden awakening from the paralysis of this judgment taught me in high school and in two of the world's great universities. Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching history in 1906 and said to a graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of the Black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted"

Boas and Du Bois were friends for three decades after this encounter. Boas, as a German Jew, was familiar with the experience of racial discrimination and, like Du Bois, was devoted to overturning scientific racism. They both believed that the problems facing Black people in the United States were due the result of historical, social, political, and economic circumstances, and not biological differences. While Du Bois was working to disprove scientific racism in sociology through scientific studies of American populations, Boas was attempting to conduct his own overhaul of anthropology. He objected to the practices of ethnology, which included cranial measurements, and documentation of facial features, to justify conclusions about racial and cultural inferiority of non-whites. As we'll explore next week, Boas challenged the linear notion of culture, in which human beings were assumed to progress through various evolutionary stages of culture towards a more civilized state resembling European societies. What he proposed instead, which ended up transforming not only the discipline of anthropology but mainstream 20<sup>th</sup> century understandings of culture, was that culture came apart from biology, that cultures can develop in a plurality of directions undetermined by any linear path of progress, and that there were therefore as many different types of culture as there were societies. This changed the concept of culture into one of pluralized cultures.

Going back to Boas' commencement address, delivered at the Atlanta Conference of 1906, the reference to African cultural achievements clearly made its mark on Du Bois. This was not only evident from their ensuing friendship and Du Bois' later recollection, but from a section included in his 1912 publication, *The Negro-American Artisan*. In 1902, Du Bois had published a study called *The Negro Artisan*, a characteristically detailed study of Black skilled laborers in Georgia, based on surveys



of 1300 laborers. It was supplemented by historical studies concerning Black laborers in the pre-Civil War era, and the types of work they would do while enslaved.

In 1912, Du Bois returned to this study to update it. He introduced this new publication, *The Negro-American Artisan*, as follows:

“In 1902 Atlanta University made a study of the Negro artisan. Ten years later we come back to the same study, with a desire to ascertain the present condition of the Negro American artisan. to inquire into his training and experience, and to set forth in positive, scientific statements the actual economic and social conditions of this important group of American citizens, their problems and their prospects.”

In this new version of the study in 1912, Du Bois includes a new kind of data for his conclusion that Black people were skilled artisans and not, by any means, incapable on the basis of racial inferiority of contributing to the advancement of American society. This is his study of African Life presented before he moves onto a specific consideration of African Americans. In it, he quotes Franz Boas’s commencement address to the Atlanta Conference at length, in which Boas described the likely African origin of the important human invention of smelting iron. In the section of the address quoted by Du Bois, which is over a page long, Boas had stated,

“While much of the history of early invention is shrouded in darkness, it seems likely that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron. Consider for a moment what this invention has meant for the advance of the human race.”

Boas had also described the wonderful crafts of various African communities, saying:

“I regret that we have no place in this country where the beauty and daintiness of African work can be shown; but a walk thru the African museums of Paris, London and Berlin is a revelation. I wish you could see the scepters of African kings, carved of hard wood and representing artistic forms ; or the dainty basketry made by the people of the Kongo river and of the region near the great lakes of the Nile; or the grass mats with their beautiful patterns... In short, everywhere you look, you find a thrifty people, full of energy, capable of forming large states...In place of indolence you find thrift and ingenuity, and application to occupations that require not only industry but also inventiveness and a high degree of technical skill.”

In this early section of *The Negro-American Artisan*, Du Bois also lists the cultural and artistic achievements of artisans from various African ethnic groups, including baskets, mats, carpets, cloths, hides, shoes weapons, axes, hatchets, hoes, shields, earthenware, utensils, woodenware, scythes, soap, and much more.

In this section, Du Bois asks the question, “Had there been anything in the African life which could render the Negroes capable of taking a part in the building of homes, the acquiring of wealth, the

developing of the new land, the building of the nation? Is there any evidence of mechanical skill among the African natives?”

And by providing this ethnographic information—much more anthropological than sociological—he is supporting the affirmative conclusion he proceeds to make in his mostly sociological survey-based study: that is, yes, there is a great deal of *anthropological* evidence that African-Americans, from the point of view of their African race, have a great capacity for being successful, thriving contributors to American civilized society. Certainly, nothing on the basis of their biological connection to African people suggests otherwise.

It seems that, in coming to know Boas’ work, Du Bois had recognized an evidential triangulation for his own sociological studies disproving racist assumptions about African-American inferiority. That is, he could draw upon the work of Boas to show that the radical conclusions he was drawing concerning the racial equality of African-Americans was supported by another distinct area of scholarship, which was empirical anthropology, thereby making his claims more convincing. This triangulation between Boas and Du Bois proved a very powerful one in overturning the consensus view of linear biological-cultural evolution and the inferiority of Black people.

We will discuss Boas and his important work in transforming the culture concept next week. Don’t forget to leave any questions or comments in the comments section.