



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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Publication and on-going maintenance of this textbook is possible due to grant support from [Oregon State University Ecampus](https://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/).

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PART IV

EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Du Bois on The Study of Social Problems (1898)

“The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.”¹

NOTE ON SOURCE: This selection was published as an article in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 1898, as “The Study of the Negro Problems.” The article has been severely shortened to focus on issues related to sociology and how best to study controversial social problems sociologically.

Introduction to the selection

In this article, published to an audience of (white) scholars, Du Bois both surveys the current state of scholarship in the area of African American research (woefully inadequate) and makes a passionate plea for systematic and scientific research in this area. Choosing his words carefully, the article is organized in such a way to lull his readers into what at first appears a rather standard “literature review” and historical presentation, but which becomes, in the second half of the article (most of which is reproduced here), a strong statement about the necessity of a commitment to truth-seeking in research. Acknowledging that (white) people of his day had very strong opinions on the subject of “the African American problem,” DuBois demonstrates the importance of science for providing real facts about the world from which eventual solutions can be fashioned.

The Study of Social Problems

The present period in the development of sociological study is a trying one; it is the period of observation, research and comparisons – work always wearisome, often aimless, without well-settled principles and guiding lines, and subject ever to the pertinent criticism: What, after all, has been accomplished?

Being in a period of observation and comparison, we must confess to ourselves that the sociologists of few nations have so good an opportunity of observing the growth and evolution of society as those of the United States. The rapid rise of a young country, the vast social changes, the wonderful economic development, the bold political experiments, and the contact of varying moral standards – all these make for American students’

1. This famous line is the epitaph from *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

crucial tests of social action, microcosmic reproductions of long centuries of world history, and rapid – even violent – repetitions of great social problems. Here is a field for the sociologist – a field rich, but little worked, and full of great possibilities.

In our field, however, there does not seem to have been awakened as yet a fitting realization of the opportunities for scientific inquiry. This is the group of social phenomena arising from the presence in this land of eight million persons of African descent.

It is my purpose here to discuss certain considerations concerning the study of the social problems affecting African Americans.²

Development of the Problems

A social problem is the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life. If, for instance, a government founded on universal manhood suffrage has a portion of its population so ignorant as to be unable to vote intelligently, such ignorance becomes a menacing social problem. The impossibility of economic and social development in a community where a large percent of the population refuses to abide by the social rules of order, makes a problem of crime and lawlessness. Prostitution becomes a social problem when the demands of home life conflict with marriage customs.

Thus, a social problem is ever a relation between conditions and action, and as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group from time to time and from place to place, so social problems change, develop and grow.

In the latter part of the 17th and early in the 18th centuries, the central and all-absorbing economic need of America was the creation of a proper labor supply to develop American wealth. This question had been answered in the West Indies by enslaving Indians and Africans. In the colonies of the mainland it was answered by the importation of people from Africa and indentured servants from Europe. Immediately then there arose the question of the legal status of these slaves and servants; and dozens of enactments, from Massachusetts to Georgia, were made “for the proper regulation of slaves and servants.” Such statutes sought to solve problems of labor and not of race or color. Two circumstances, however, soon began to differentiate in the problem of labor, problems which concerned slaves for life from those which concerned servants for limited periods; and these circumstances were the economic superiority of the slave system, and the fact that the slaves were neither of the same race, language nor religion as the servants and their masters. In laboring

2. Du Bois used the term “Negro” throughout as the correct historical term to denote those of African descent. Because he explicitly calls attention, in the beginning of the article, to the African ancestry of this group, I have chosen to replace all uses of the archaic negro term with the more currently approved African American. When Du Bois uses negro as an adjective, denoting color of skin, I use Black.

classes thus widely separated there naturally arose a difference in legal and social standing. Colonial statutes soon ceased to embrace the regulations applying to slaves and servants in one chapter, and laws were passed for servants on the one hand and for Black slaves on the other.

As slave labor, under the peculiar conditions of colonial life, increased in value and efficiency, the importations of Africans increased, while those of indentured servants decreased; this gave rise to new social problems. Between 1750 and 1800 an increasing number of laws began to form a peculiar and systematic slave code based on a distinct idea of social caste. Even as this slave code was developing, new social conditions changed the aspect of the problems. The laws hitherto had been made to fit a class distinguished by its condition more than by its race or color. There arose now, however, a class of English-speaking African Americans, members of Christian churches; there sprang from illicit intercourse and considerable intermarriage with indentured servants, a number of persons of mixed race; there was also created by emancipation and the birth of Black sons of White women a new class of free African Americans: all these developments led to a distinct beginning of group life among people of African descent. Repeated attempts at organized insurrection were made; wholesale running away was resorted to; and a class of Black landholders and voters arose. Such social movements brought the colonists face to face with new and serious problems; which they sought at first to settle in curious ways, denying the rite of baptism, establishing the legal presumption that all people of African and mixed-race descent were slaves, and finally changing the Slave Code into a Black Code, replacing a caste of condition by a caste of race, harshly stopping sexual intercourse, and seeking to prevent further complications by restricting and even suppressing the slave trade.

Du Bois continues here to discuss problems that developed during slavery and the following Jim Crow era.

The Present Problems

All social growth means a succession of social problems – they constitute growth, they denote that laborious and often baffling adjustment of action and condition which is the essence of progress, and while a particular fact or circumstance may serve in one country as a rallying point of many intricate questions of adjustment, the absence of that particular fact would not mean the absence of all social problems. Questions of labor, caste, ignorance, and race were bound to arise in America; they were simply complicated here and intensified thereby the presence of the African American.

Let us inquire somewhat more carefully into the form under which the African American problems present themselves today after 275 years of evolution. Their existence is plainly manifested by the fact that a definitely segregated mass of eight millions of Americans do not wholly share the national life of the people; are not an integral part of the social body.

If an African American discusses the question, he is apt to discuss simply the problem of race prejudice; if a Southern white man writes on the subject, he is apt to discuss problems of ignorance, crime and social degradation. We should seek to know and measure carefully all the forces and conditions that go to make up these different problems, to trace the historical development of these conditions, and discover as far as

possible the probable trend of further development. Without doubt this would be difficult work, and it can with much truth be objected that we cannot ascertain, by the method of sociological research known to us, all such facts thoroughly and accurately. To this objection it is only necessary to answer that however difficult it may be to know all about African Americans, it is certain that we can know vastly more than we do, and that we can have our knowledge in a more systematic and intelligible form. As things are, our opinions upon the African American are more matters of faith than knowledge. Every schoolboy is ready to discuss the matter, and there are few men that have not settled convictions. Such a situation is dangerous. Whenever any nation allows impulse, whim or hasty conjecture to usurp the place of conscious, normative, intelligent action, it is in grave danger. The sole aim of any society is to settle its problems in accordance with its highest ideals, and the only rational method of accomplishing this is to study those problems in the light of the best scientific research.

The Work Already Accomplished

It may be said that it is not altogether correct to assert that few attempts have been made to study these problems or to put the nation in possession of a body of truth in accordance with which it might act intelligently... and yet a careful survey of the field seems but to emphasize the fact that the work done bears but small proportion to the work still to be done.³

Moreover the studies made hitherto can as a whole be justly criticized in three particulars: (1) they have not been based on a thorough knowledge of details; (2) they have been unsystematical; (3) they have been uncritical.

In few subjects have historians been more content to go on indefinitely repeating current traditions and uninvestigated facts. In the hasty endeavor to cover a broad subject when the details were unknown, much superficial work has been current, like that, for instance, of a newspaper reporter who spent "the odd intervals of leisure" for "nearly 18 months" in the District of Columbia, and forthwith published a study of 80,000 African Americans, with observations on their institutions and development.

Again, the work done has been lamentably unsystematic and fragmentary. Scientific work must be subdivided, but conclusions which affect the whole subject must be based on a study of the whole. One cannot study the African American in freedom and come to general conclusions about his destiny without knowing his history in slavery. A vast set of problems having a common center must, too, be studied according to some general plan, if the work of different students is to be compared or to go toward building a unified body of knowledge.

3. Indeed, despite the plea of Du Bois here, and the importance of addressing issues of race in American society, it was not until 1981 that the ASA section on "Racial and Ethnic Minorities" was established. In 1997, the section on "Race, Gender, and Class" was established, taking a more intersectional approach to the study of these problems.

Most unfortunate of all, however, is the fact that so much work done on the African American question is notoriously uncritical; uncritical from lack of discrimination in the selection and weighing of evidence; uncritical in choosing the proper point of view from which to study these problems, and, finally, uncritical from the distinct bias in the minds of so many writers. One student declares that African Americans are advancing in knowledge and ability; that they are working, establishing homes, and going into business, and that the problem will soon be one of the past. Another student of equal learning declares that the African American is degenerating – sinking into crime and social immorality, receiving little help from education, still in the main a menial servant, and destined in a short time to settle the problem by dying out entirely. Such and many other contradictory conclusions arise from the uncritical use of material. A visitor to a great African American school in the South catches the inspiration of youth, studies the work of graduates, and imbibes the hopes of teachers and immediately infers from the situation of a few hundred the general condition of a population numbering twice that of Holland. A college graduate sees the slums of a Southern city, looks at the plantation field hands, and has some experience with African American servants, and from the laziness, crime and disease which he finds, draws conclusions as to eight millions of people, stretched from Maine to Texas and from Florida to Washington. We continually judge the whole from the part we are familiar with: we continually assume the material we have at hand to be typical; we reverently receive a column of figures without asking who collected them, how they were arranged, how far they are valid, and what chances of error they contain; we receive the testimony of men without asking whether they were trained or ignorant, careful or careless, truthful or given to exaggeration, and, above all, whether they are giving facts or opinions. It is so easy for a man who has already formed his conclusions to receive any and all testimony in their favor without carefully weighing and testing it, that we sometimes find in serious scientific studies very curious proof of broad conclusions. To cite an extreme case, in a recently published study of the African American, a part of the argument as to the physical condition of these millions is made to rest on the measurement of fifteen Black boys in a New York reformatory.

The widespread habit of studying the African American from one point of view only, that of his influence on the white inhabitants, is also responsible for much uncritical work. The slaves are generally treated as one inert changeless mass, and most studies of slavery apparently have no conception of a social evolution and development among them. The slave code of a state is given, the progress of anti-slavery sentiment, the economic results of the system and the general influence of man on master are studied, but of the slave herself, of her group life and social institutions, of remaining traces of her African tribal life, of her amusements, her conversion to Christianity, her acquiring of the English tongue – in fine, of her whole reaction against her environment, of all this we hear little or nothing, and would apparently be expected to believe that the African American arose from the dead in 1863.

The most baneful cause of uncritical study of the African American is the manifest and far-reaching bias of writers. Americans are born in many cases with deep, fierce convictions on the African American question, and in other cases imbibe them from their environment. When such people come to write on the subject, without technical training, without breadth of view, and in some cases without a deep sense of the sanctity of scientific truth, their testimony, however interesting as opinion, must of necessity be worthless as science.

A Program of Future Study

If we admit the deep importance of the African American problems, the necessity of studying them, and certain shortcomings in work done up to this time, it would seem to be the clear duty of the American people, in the interests of scientific knowledge and social reform, to begin a broad and systematic study of the history and condition of African Americans.

The scope of any social study is first of all limited by the general attitude of public opinion toward truth and truth-seeking. If in regard to any social problem there is for any reason a persistent refusal on the part of the people to allow the truth to be known, then manifestly that problem cannot be studied. Even today there are certain phases of this question which we cannot hope to be allowed to study dispassionately and thoroughly. For instance, it is extremely doubtful if any satisfactory study of Black crime and lynching can be made for a generation or more, in the present condition of the public mind, which renders it almost impossible to get at the facts and real conditions. On the other hand, public opinion has in the last decade become sufficiently liberal to open a broad field of investigation to students, and here lies the chance for effective work.

The right to enter this field undisturbed and untrammelled will depend largely on the attitude of science itself. Students must be careful to insist that science as such – be it physics, chemistry, psychology, or sociology – has but one simple aim: the discovery of truth. Its results lie open for the use of all people – merchants, physicians, academics, and philanthropists, but the aim of science itself is simple truth. Any attempt to give it a double aim, to make social reform the immediate instead of the mediate object of a search for truth, will inevitably tend to defeat both objects. The frequent alliance of sociological research with various panaceas and particular schemes of reform, has resulted in closely connecting social investigation with a good deal of groundless assumption and humbug in the popular mind. There will be at first some difficulty in bringing the Southern people, both Black and White, to conceive of an earnest, careful study of the African American problem which has not back of it some scheme of race amalgamation, political jobbery, or deportation to Africa. The new study of the African American must avoid such misapprehensions from the outset, by insisting that historical and statistical research has but one object, the ascertainment of the facts as to the social forces and conditions of one-eighth of the inhabitants of the land. Only by such rigid adherence to the true object of the scholar, can politicians and philanthropists of all shades of belief be put into possession of a reliable body of truth which may guide their efforts to the best and largest success.

Finally, the necessity must again be emphasized of keeping clearly before students the object of all science, amid the turmoil and intense feelings that clouds the discussion of a burning social question. We live in a day when in spite of the brilliant accomplishments of a remarkable century, there is current much flippant criticism of scientific work; when the truth-seeker is too often pictured as devoid of human sympathy, and careless of human ideals. We are still prone in spite of all our culture to sneer at the heroism of the laboratory while we cheer the swagger of the street broil. At such a time true lovers of humanity can only hold higher the pure ideals of science, and continue to insist that if we would solve a problem, we must study it, and that there is but one coward on earth, and that is the coward that dare not know.

Questions

1. How does Du Bois define “social problems”?
2. Remember that Du Bois is writing for an almost exclusively white audience. How might this have affected his presentation of “the problem”? What is it that Du Bois is suggesting sociology do? Considering the critique of existing research included here, can you describe what *good* research in this area would look like? What is wrong with the (white) newspaper reporter in DC’s study? With the study of fifteen reformatory boys?
3. Du Bois’ article raises issues of standpoint epistemology – how our social locations affect what we see (and what we study). What examples can you find in the text? How do sociologists today overcome problems associated with standpoint bias?
4. What is the difference between opinion and science? How is this related to the definition of sociology that emerges in these early texts (here, Durkheim, Veblen, Giddings)?
5. Du Bois laments the impossibility of studying “crime and lynching” at the time of this article’s publication, due to the impassioned prejudice of the public mind. Are there similar topics today which would be difficult if not impossible to study, given the state of public opinion? What should a sociologist do in these cases? What does this say about the relationship between politics (and the political context) and science? Is it possible to have science in a totalitarian regime, for example?
6. What is the aim of science? Why does Du Bois caution against aiming for social reform?