
A Sociological Examination of W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*

Sandra L. Barnes, Purdue University

©2003 Sandra L. Barnes. Any archiving, redistribution, or republication of this text in any medium requires the consent of the author.

The centennial anniversary of W.E. B. Du Bois' seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, merits both celebration and reflection. Academic and mainstream arenas need pause to consider the implications of his "slender book" on our understanding of the burden and scope of prejudice. *The Souls of Black Folk* serves as testament to Du Bois' position as one of the foremost scholars on race and religion, in general, and the Black experience, in particular. In just fourteen essays, Du Bois provided keen insight into the social problems of the day. The text is important due to its broad applications for understanding the religious, economic, political, social, and cultural implications of a society precariously structured to garner and measure the success of the one group at the expense of another. Furthermore, Du Bois' observations and findings are timeless; many of his concerns continue to plague society today. Du Bois presented a conundrum - how a religious, White America could be so entrenched in racism, on one hand, and how a deeply aggrieved Black America negotiated such terrain through the use of that same religion.

The author eloquently informed the reader of a variety of challenges faced by Blacks as a result of inequities in every societal arena. In addition, he delved into their *spiritual psyche* to show an indomitable spirit. The strength of the work also lies in Du Bois' ability to systematically and critically assess flaws in White society and the resulting limitations in Black society. Although he clearly pointed to the legacy of racism as the primary culprit that stymied progress for the Black masses, he was able to soberly attest to ways in which a large segment of the Black population refused to avail themselves of those existing resources required to

improve their lot. At the heart of the text was the presentation of a conflicted, dichotomized identify-being Black and American - where the former identity labeled one a "problem" to be ignored, pitied, or stigmatized and the latter identity served as a constant reminder of a legacy of oppression and station to be esteemed but never reached. Du Bois also used other dichotomies - the sacred and secular, qualitative and quantitative analyses, and examples of oppression and liberation.

The themes of race and religion were woven through each essay to illustrate life behind "the veil" for the slave, the freed person, and the Negro. This same theme provides insight about "double consciousness" for Blacks today. The author's tone moved from somber observation to jubilant testimony as he chronicled a history fraught by the illogical, the impractical, the senseless and, in some instances, the horrific. And although Black folk faced a barrage of negative structural forces such as racism, classism, and sexism, Du Bois continued to illustrate how their souls somehow remained intact and ready to fight another day. Upon completion of the work, we are disquieted by the stark reality of the harshness Blacks faced, yet somewhat optimistic in the belief that they would somehow triumph. Today's reader benefits from the manner in which Du Bois highlighted pressing social problems. His observations aid sociologists that attempt to explore, explain, describe, predict, and address social ills. The remaining sections of this essay will consider some of the ways in which Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* informs the discipline of sociology in terms of racism and race relations, economic inequality, political disenfranchisement and Black leadership, education, and religion and the Black Church.

Racism and Race Relations

First and foremost, Du Bois emphasized the legacy of racism and its deleterious effects on the lives of Black people. Certain consequences of racism and discrimination were clear - separate spheres of life, physical abuse, paternalism, and economic disenfranchisement. Other consequences were less visible, but just as detrimental - angst, conflicted identity, self-hate, self-doubt, and a lack of industriousness and self-reliance. For Du Bois, issues of race were at the heart of the conflicted relationship between Whites and Blacks in America. And although the problem was ideological and steeped in a protracted view of religion, its effects trickled through every dimension of Black life. He also informed the reader that racism and discrimination not only stymied Blacks, but had serious repercussions for Whites whose fear, doubt, distrust, contempt, and hatred of Blacks diminished their own humanity. Thus the legacy of racism left the entire nation deficient of the basic human qualities on which it was supposedly founded. Du Bois recognized diversity, but believed that a humane society should strive for fellowship and address social problems due to the central importance, the *intrinsic value*, of all humanity.

The thorough manner in which Du Bois examined the legacy of racism enables scholars to examine current implications. Segregation in urban cities, economic inequality, and poverty are evidence of the cumulative effects of racism (Wilson 1986; 1997). International terrorism, hate crimes, and the prison industrial complex teeming with Black males point to Du Bois' observation of the tendency to consider differences with suspicion and mistrust. And although our society is more tolerant than ever before, a new form of racism exists - aversive racism - characterized by egalitarian attitudes, but avoidance and subtle discrimination against Blacks (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986). And Blacks continue to face the dilemma of double consciousness (Billingsley 1992). As posited by Cornel West (1993), research confirms that "race" still matters in terms of opportunity, access, treatment, and quality of life.

Economic Inequities

Du Bois suggested that the economic plight of Blacks began during slavery when persons worked for no money and continued after Emancipation when Blacks worked for very little money. For most, accumulating wealth was not an option for even industrious freed persons had to contend with Whites who undermined their efforts. Du Bois was particularly critical of the South's influence, where plantations were replaced by tenant farming, and the political, legal, and social systems supported thievery. During the several great migrations of the 20th century, rural cabins described by Du Bois as "dirty and dilapidated, smelling of eating and sleeping, poorly ventilated, and anything but homes" (p. 140) were replaced by urban slums, squalor, and continued discrimination (Frazier 1964) as the North took part in oppressive tactics. Literature suggests that the effects of historic discrimination have resulted in a disproportionate percentage of poor Blacks (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1986, 1997). For example, in 1996 although Blacks comprised approximately 12 percent of the US population, they made up about 28 percent of the poor. Although about 75 percent of all poor people are White, Blacks, especially single mothers and their children, are at greater risk of poverty. And just as Du Bois' tenant farmers' outlook was "almost hopeless" (pg. 141), scholars suggest a growing angst in the Black community (Massey and Denton 1993; West 1993) that cannot be combated without, among other things, economic redress.

Political Disenfranchisement and Black Leadership

Just as the theologian and philosopher Cornel West (1993) critiques the absence of effective Black leaders, Du Bois questioned the leadership role of Booker T. Washington and his apologetic stance toward Whites. Although Du Bois acknowledged Washington's sincerity and successes, he noted, "there is among educated and thoughtful colored men in all parts of the land a feeling of deep regret, sorrow, and apprehension at the wide currency and ascendancy which some of Mr. Washington's theories have gained" (p. 47). Unlike the honor he bestowed upon

Alexander Crummell, Du Bois believed that Washington's stance justified continued oppressive conditions and squelched potential resistance by the Black masses. Du Bois argued that the accomplishments of Blacks can be linked to the caliber and character of Black leaders. A century later, West (1993) queries, "How do we account for the absence of the Frederick Douglasses, Sojourner Truths, Martin Luther King Jrs., Malcolm Xs, and Fannie Lou Hamers in our time? Why hasn't black America produced intellectuals of the caliber of W.E. B. Du Bois...in the past few decades?" (p. 35). Based on West's (1993) typology of Black political leaders, Washington could be considered a "race-effacing managerial leader" that succumbed to hegemony, rather than a race-transcending prophetic leader that would critique the status quo as well as Blacks who blindly follow its dictates. Current attempts to subvert Affirmative Action legislation, Black conservatism, ambivalence by both national parties toward Black concerns, and the transition of Blacks from the position as the largest racial minority group inform Du Bois' observation in *Souls*:

To-day the black man...has almost nothing to say as to how much he shall be taxed, or how those taxes shall be expended; as to who shall execute the laws, and how they shall do it; as to who shall make the laws, and how they shall be made...the laws are made by men who have little interest in him; they are executed by men who have absolutely no motive for treating the black people with courtesy or consideration (pp. 176-177).

Importance of Education

Du Bois reminisced about his teaching experiences in rural Tennessee in Chapter IV and chronicled the trials and tragic fate of the "educated" John in Chapter XIII's "Of the Coming of John." But he continued to point to education as the primary means of mobility and character development for Blacks. He also noted the difficulty in convincing segments of the Black population of the merits of education given the limited options upon completion. The author

applauded the, "planting of the free school among Negroes" (p. 34) and recognized the need for a diverse education system. However, he was clear that those persons most equipped in character and dedication should serve as leaders (The Talented Tenth) and hone their skills via a liberal arts education. He applauded certain Southern universities and provided empirical evidence of the benefits of education in Chapter VI. Education continues to be important for success. Billingsley (1992) suggests that education, hard work, and strong families have enabled Blacks, more than any other race, to progress from working class to middle class in one generation. And although certain scholars theorize that some Blacks reject the importance of formal education and hold disdain for their high achieving peers (Ogbu 1978, 1991), more systematic research shows the converse (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Barnes 2002; Wilson 1997). However, as was Du Bois' assessment, segments of Black America continue to be constrained today due to sub-par educational systems.

Significance of Religion and the Black Church

Just as issues of race are central in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois was clear that religion, characterized by "the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy" (p. 191) served to sustain and empower a people. And just as Du Bois acknowledged the Black Church as the social center of Black life, studies suggest that it continues to serve as a vanguard in the Black community due to its dual sacred and secular roles. The Church meets religious needs, serves as an educational arena, provides economic aid, and provides sanctuary from discrimination, racism, and other stresses (Felder 1991; Frazier 1964; Lincoln 1984; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). As the oldest organization owned, financed, and controlled by Blacks, it also cultivates Black identity. From the "invisible institution" during slavery to the organized Black Church, the institution allowed for the creative, adaptive fusion of African religions and Christianity to develop a collective identity in response to hegemony and discrimination experienced in White religious settings (Billingsley 1999; Felder 1991; Wilmore 1994). Current scholarship also links the

Church to role models, more authentic religious expression, self-esteem, and community outreach (Billingsley 1999; Calhoun-Brown 1998, 1999; Ellison 1992, 1993; Krause and Tran 1989; Paris 1982; Patillo-McCoy 1998, 1999). And Black involvement in church has been linked to increased life satisfaction as compared to their White counterparts (Ellison 1993; St. George and McNamara 1984).

Past scholars who found activism among Black churches (Harris 1987; Morris 1984) may be concerned about increased fundamentalism that may placate activism (Wilmore 1994, 1995). But according to most recent studies, the contemporary Black Church continues to galvanize large segments of the Black community to address social problems such as neighborhood poverty, gang violence, and drug abuse and provides activities for Black youth and young adults (Calhoun-Brown 1998; McRoberts 1999; Patillo-McCoy 1998, 1999; Taylor 1994). However, like Du Bois, others suggest that the Church does not always proactively address the needs of the less-educated masses, better educated Blacks that require more than fire and brimstone sermons, youth and young adults who question tradition (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) and competition due to the increased religious and social outlets now available to Blacks (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). How the contemporary Black church contends with issues such as the AIDS pandemic, poverty, and growing diversity will speak to its continued effectiveness.

And just as Du Bois observed, church settings continue to be one of the most racially segregated arenas in the country (Clayton 1996; Rusaw 1996). Although issues of race are now being discussed more than ever (Barnes 1997; Becker 1998; Hadaway, Miller, and Fogle 1984), religious segregation is the norm. Du Bois accused White religion of hypocrisy and Black religion of encouraging complacency. Although the souls of Black folk were deeply shaped by religion and Sorrow Songs, Du Bois remained concerned that negative experiences would embitter the Black masses. Similarly, West (1993) suggests that angst and nihilism now permeate segments of the Black community. For West, only a psychic

conversion, by both Whites and Blacks, will abate the social problems that loom large in our society.

The *Souls of Black Folk* holds a unique position as a religious commentary, a social critique, a testimony to the human spirit, a literary treasure, and an empirical analysis of political and economic conditions. At the heart of its legacy is victory in the face of adversity. And although Sorrow Songs elevate the spirit of an oppressed people and instill hope, Du Bois wrote candidly about what is required to effectively combat racial inequities, "Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph" (p. 189). His observation was true then and it remains so today.

©2003 Sandra L. Barnes. Any archiving, redistribution, or republication of this text in any medium requires the consent of the author.

REFERENCES:

- Ainsworth-Darnell, James W. and Douglas B. Downey. 1999. "Assessing the Oppositional Culture Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Differences in School Performance." *American Sociological Review* 63: 536-553.
- Barnes, Sandra. 1997. "Practicing What You Preach: An Analysis of Racial Attitudes of Two Christian Churches," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 21(1):1-11.
- _____. 2002. "Achievement or Ascription Ideology? An Analysis of Attitudes about Future Success for Residents in Poor Urban Neighborhoods," *Sociological Focus* 35(2): 207-225.
- Becker, Penney. 1998. "Making Inclusive Communities: Congregations and the 'Problem' of Race." *Social Problems* 45(4): 451-472.
- Billingsley, Andrew. 1992. *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families*. New York: A Touchstone Book.
- _____. 1999. *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Calhoun-Brown, Alison. 1998. "While Marching to Zion: Otherworldliness and Racial Empowerment in the Black Community." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37:426-439.
- _____. 1999. "The Image of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community." *Review of Religious Research* 40:197-212.
- Clayton, Obie Jr. 1996. "The Church and Social Change: Accommodation, Moderation, or Protest." in Obie Clayton (ed), *An American Dilemma Revisited: Race Relations in a Changing World*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 191-208.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903[1996]. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Ellison, Christopher. 1992. "Are Religious People Nice People? Evidence from the National Survey of Black Americans." *Social Forces* 71(2): 411-430.
- _____. 1993. "Religious Involvement and Self-Perception among Black Americans," *Social Forces* 71(4): 1071-1055.
- Ellison, Christopher and Darren Sherkat. 1995. "The 'Semi-Involuntary Institution' Revisited: Regional Variations in Church Participation Among Black Americans." *Social Forces* 73(4): 1415-1437.
- Felder, Cain Hope (ed). 1991. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1964. *The Negro Church in America*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Gaertner, John and Samuel Dovidio. 1986. *Prejudice, Racism, and Discrimination*. Orlando: Academic Press.
- Hadaway, C. Kirk, David Miller, and James Fogle. 1984. "The Most Segregated Institution: Correlates of Interracial Church Participation." *Review of Religious Research* 25(3): 204-219.
- Harris, James H, 1987. *Black Ministers and Laity in the Urban Church: An Analysis of Political and Social Expectations*. New York: University Press of America.
- Krause, Neal and Thanh Van Tran. 1989. "Stress and Religious Involvement among Older Blacks." *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 44:4-13.
- Lincoln, C. Eric. 1984. *Race, Religion and the Continuing American Dilemma*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. 1990. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Massey Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton. 1993. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Massachusetts: Harvard University

Press.

McRoberts, Omar. 1999. "Understanding the 'New' Black Pentecostal Activism: Lessons from Ecumenical Urban Ministries in Boston." *Sociology of Religion* 60:47-70.

Morris, Aldon D. 1984. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: The Free Press.

Ogbu, John U. 1978. *Minority Education and Caste*. New York: Academic Press.

_____. 1991. "Low Performance as an Adaptation: The Case of Blacks in Stockton, California." Pp. 249-285 in *Minority Status and Schooling*, edited by M.A. Gibson and J. U. Ogbu. New York: Grand Publishing.

Patillo-McCoy, Mary. 1998. "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community." *American Sociological Review* 63:767-784.

_____. 1999. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Paris, Arthur. 1982. *Black Pentecostalism: Southern Religion in an Urban World*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press.

Rusaw, Carol. 1996. "All God's Children: Leading Diversity in Churches as Organizations." *Leadership Quarterly* 7(2): 229-241.

St. George, Arthur and Patrick McNamara. 1984. "Religion, Race, and Psychological Well-Being." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23:351-63.

Taylor, Clarence. 1994. *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*. New York: Columbia University Press.

West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Wilmore, Gayraud S. 1994. *Black Religion and Black*

Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People. New York: Orbis Books.

_____. (ed.). 1995. *African-American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Durham: Duke University Press

Wilson, William Julius. 1986. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____. 1997. *When Work Disappears*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.