



Sociological Racism: An Appreciation of Aldon Morris' *Scholar Denied*

Aldon D. Morris. 2015. *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 320 pages, ISBN 978-0-5202-7635-2 Cloth (\$34.95)

This is not a traditional review. I was deeply immersed in the evolution of *The Scholar Denied*, carefully reading drafts of chapters, and party to more email conversations than I can count about its shape, substance, and analysis. And I have also become a part of the initiative inspired by Morris' book that seeks to reintegrate Du Boisean analysis into the sociological canon (Schwartz 2017a; 2017b). So I am writing what I choose to call an 'appreciation' because I believe that Morris' accomplishment—sifting a mountain range of evidence, building a multi-themed narrative, and synthesizing initially dispersed observations into a compelling perspective that has real implications for how social scientists approach their work—should be made accessible to the broadest possible audience. And I also want to share my conviction that this book can provide real impetus for the decades-old effort to integrate the Du Boisean perspective (at long last) into the sociological canon, where it is sorely needed. I hope this commentary will give the reader just enough evidence and argument to whet (but not satisfy) your appetite for *The Scholar Denied* — and for a delicious feast of Du Bois' scholarship.

Even though the book is structured as an engrossing biographical narrative, it is actually a multilayered endeavor that combines (and revises) wisdom from venerable scholarly areas — notably intellectual history, social theory, sociology of science, and social movements — with insights useful to currently vibrant conceptual developments, notably intersectionality, critical race



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theory, and world-systems theory. To accomplish these connections, *The Scholar Denied* offers us a series of (temporally consecutive) narratives around Du Bois' involvement in (and exclusion from) various key moments in the history of sociology as a discipline. This modular approach allows Morris to use his compositional skill to leaven out (of an ocean of evidence) key dynamics that are central to his larger analysis, without robbing the all-important events of their historical context. (As an additional virtue, the method simultaneously allows non-specialists to access the argument while permitting specialists to hone in on crucial evidence).

Let me start out by tracing a key thread of the narrative history —how W.E.B. Du Bois was expelled from mainstream sociology —and then rely on this narrative as a platform for pointing to some of the key contributions of the book. The story starts with Du Bois' first appointment as a sociologist: a non-tenured research position at the University of Pennsylvania, then one of a handful institutions that recognized sociology as an independent discipline. Most people with a passing knowledge of the history of sociology (or Du Bois' biography) know that it was at Penn that Du Bois planned, executed, and published *The Philadelphia Negro*, the pathbreaking study that is still in print and still widely read as an enduring masterpiece of sociological analysis. But I think hardly anyone knows —I didn't before I read early drafts of *The Scholar Denied* —that *The Philadelphia Negro* was the first comprehensive community study ever conducted in the United States, and that it pioneered a tool-kit of methods that have become the standard for rigorous social science. And only a tiny group of Du Bois aficionados know that, once published it was fully appreciated, even acclaimed, for its path breaking methods, rigorous analysis, and dramatic rethinking of the accepted academic wisdom about the structure and functioning of urban society. Moreover, the scholarly community generally acknowledged his spirited documentation of the racism practiced against the African-American community in Philadelphia. And, finally, in some cases, reviewers even mentioned the mountain of evidence he produced (and the inductive analysis he presented) that (in retrospect definitively) disconfirmed scholarly dogma that the condition of African Americans reflected inborn racial inferiority.

This acceptance of Du Bois' work as a major contribution to scholarly discourse during the “nadir” of post-Civil War race relations was a huge surprise to me and should be to all of us: that Du Bois was accepted as a new and powerful voice in the world of academic “social science,” which was, at that time, beginning to assert its influence over scholarly discourse. Morris meticulously documents this moment of prominence inside academe by reporting the scholarly response to *The Philadelphia Negro*, replete with positive reviews and invitations to present his work in various forums. And, ultimately, over the next 20 years or so, sociologists and other social scientists in the elite institutions conferred upon him the sincerest form of acclaim: imitation and appropriation. By the late 1920s, community studies built on *The Philadelphia Negro* template had become the *sin qua non* of sociological analysis.

But this brief moment of acceptance into “the community of scholars” was a prelude to the first of many chapters in Morris’ narrative of denial. In the late-19th century (like today) the publication of an acclaimed and pioneering study by a (white) junior scholar constituted a passport into a tenured job at an elite institution; then, in due course, access to the resources and influence commensurate with that status; and, ultimately, canonization as a venerated pioneer. But Du Bois was a black scholar advancing an anti-racist perspective that challenged the powerful white supremacist orthodoxy hegemonic at Penn and elsewhere in the academic world. So his appointment at Penn came to an abrupt end, and despite his standing as a first rank sociologist, no other white university in North America would hire him.

It was this moment, even before the beginning of the 20th century, which marked Du Bois’ expulsion from the community of white —and mainstream —sociological scholars in the United States. As Morris shows, this “casting out” of a founding father of modern sociology was quickly institutionalized, engineered at first by the social Darwinist “founding fathers” of the American Sociological Society, and later under the leadership of Robert Park and the University of Chicago sociology department. The exclusion meant that Du Bois (and subsequent generations of African-American scholars) was not welcome on white campuses, professional meetings, and funding agencies, and that his scholarship (and that of other anti-racist Black and white scholars) was excised from mainstream books, journals, and classrooms. Before reading *The Scholar Denied*, I had no idea how explicit and systematic the exclusion was, and I hope that the world gets to digest Aldon’s careful analysis of how this nexus of exclusionary practices and institutions was *constructed*.

The ossified discriminatory structure built to beat back Du Bois’ personal and scholarly challenge to the establishment, which congealed into the systematic exclusion of Black scholars and anti-racist perspectives, prevailed without much erosion for at least half a century. *The Scholar Denied* offers us not only a revealing dissection of this discriminatory structure, but also the analytic tools for recognizing and defeating its contemporary equivalents.

Morris’ account of Du Bois’ reaction to this exclusion is another revelatory moment in *The Scholar Denied*. In response to his academic assassination, Du Bois applied the soon-to-be-martyred Joe Hill’s dictum: “Don’t Mourn, Organize.” He accepted an appointment at the under-resourced, historically-black Atlanta University, which soon became the institutional home of the Atlanta School, a generation of (du Bois-trained) scholars practicing activist, insurgent sociology. For more than a decade Atlanta University was the most (yes, the most) productive center of innovative and rigorous sociological research in the country, and perhaps the world. Moreover, the exclusion of the Atlanta School’s perspective from officially sanctioned sociological discourse — most particularly the core journals and the funding sources for empirical research —constituted an occasion for the construction of counter-institutions, impelling Du Bois and his colleagues to

create what we now call Public Sociology. They substituted indigenous energy and expertise for foundation funding, and developed new scholarly outlets that reached well beyond the academic ghetto. Among their many innovations was the iconic NAACP organ *The Crisis*, which transmitted state-of-the-art research from scholars to activists without the distorting mediation of the mass media; the introduction of rigorous social science onto the world stage through a major exhibition at the Atlanta World's Fair (and a host of other public venues); and the building of enduring bridges to scholarly outlets in the less racist and therefore more accessible European academic community. (Perhaps the irony of all ironies occurred when Max Weber—even then the most respected sociologist in the Global North—declared Du Bois “the most important sociological scholar in the Southern States of America...with whom no white scholar can compare.”)

Morris' account and analysis of the (counter-) institution building of Du Bois and the Atlanta School offers the reader fresh insights into the relationship between the content of scholarship and its institutional setting. The story of the Atlanta School fully illustrates this interaction, and I want to call out one aspect of this account with particular relevance to social movement theory. The narrative arc of *The Scholar Denied* details how Du Bois and his colleagues pioneered scholarly insurgency (and its production of what Morris calls liberation capital), a kind of social movement in which the resources for scientific investigation derive from activist commitment rather than institutional resources. Sociologists studying the history of the AIDS pandemic, the spread of GMO agriculture, and other crises where collective resistance must rely on evidence-based challenges to scientific orthodoxy, will find *The Scholar Denied* a source of theoretical and practical analysis, useful in constructing scientific insurgencies that utilize liberation capital.

The Scholar Denied is as much a biography of the discipline of sociology as it is a biography of W.E.B. Du Bois. This is exemplified in Morris' meticulous analysis of the process by which Robert Park and the University of Chicago sociology department consolidated and perpetuated the exclusion of Du Bois and the Atlanta School from the guiding ideas of the discipline. While adopting (without attribution) Du Bois' methodology, the Chicago school rejected and suppressed the substantive ideas of the Du Boisean paradigm, thus misdirecting several generations of American sociologists into fruitless attempts to perfect distorted perspectives on race relations, social movements, and other areas of scholarship. Morris vividly illustrates this distortionist impact in the area of race relations by contrasting Robert Park's rejection and Max Weber's acceptance of Du Bois' perspective on the social construction of race, a contrast that reperussed through the next fifty years of research and theorizing. One of the worst elements of the Chicago School's misdirection derived from Robert Park's 'cycles of assimilation; theory, which denied the existence of structural discrimination and dismissed any potential for anti-racist agency in the black community. After several decades in which this imposed orthodoxy prevented mainstream sociology from developing any useful understanding of racism, the Civil Rights movement shook

its dominance and opened the door to further development of Du Bois' social constructionist viewpoint.

In focusing on the contrast between Du Bois' and Park's analysis of race relations, Morris also displays a virtue that sets *The Scholar Denied* apart from other works on Du Bois, and other works that seek to understand the dynamics of scholarly trajectories. The rich combination of historical scholarship with classic literary "explication de texte" produces fresh interpretations of familiar texts, yielding insights into the pernicious impact of Parks' assimilation theory. But it also yields insights into Du Bois' underappreciated analysis of race as a social construct, and points to many other underexploited conceptual and theoretical contributions in both famous and neglected Du Bois texts. *The Scholar Denied* should amplify and inspire attention to Du Bois and Atlanta School scholarship, and therefore provide evidential, conceptual and analytic tools for applying the Du Boisean perspective to the sort of public sociology that Du Bois anticipated and practiced.

My goal and hope in writing this commentary is that current and future generations of social scientists will relate to *The Scholar Denied*—and, even more urgently, to Du Bois' scholarship—as foundational for education, research, and theorizing about social life, and especially for organizing popular movements to challenge the intersectional forms of immiseration that Du Bois devoted his life and work to illuminating and eliminating.

References

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Michael Schwartz

Department of Sociology

Stony Brook University

Michael.schwartz@stonybrook.edu