

Rewriting the history of American sociology

August 27 2015, by Hilary Hurd Anyaso

In his groundbreaking new book, Northwestern University's Aldon Morris has done no less than rewrite the history of sociology by making a compelling case that black sociologist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois was the primary founder of modern sociology in America at the turn of the 20th century. It is a sociology that bases its theoretical claims on rigorous empirical research.

Pulling from over a decade of research in primary sources such as personal letters, conference proceedings and scholarly writings, "[The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology](#)" (University of California Press, August 2015) argues that power, money, politics and the ideology of white supremacy led to W.E.B. Du Bois being "written out" of the founding of sociology. Moreover his intellectual breakthroughs were marginalized in the field for the last century.

Morris, the Leon Forrest Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, argues that Du Bois' pioneering work was often characterized in the academy as unscientific and politically motivated while systemic racial biases colored the intellectual work of leading white sociologists, even those with liberal bents throughout the 20th century.

In Morris' gripping narrative, Robert E. Park, the white University of Chicago scholar considered to be one of the major architects of modern-day sociology, and Booker T. Washington, the most famous and powerful [black](#) man in America between 1895 and 1915, play a central

role in marginalizing the pioneering work that Du Bois and other black scholars produced at Atlanta University, a historically black institution.

The Du Bois-Atlanta School profoundly influenced the discipline by laying the intellectual foundations of scientific sociology, Morris argues, noting that Max Weber, the famous German sociologist and philosopher, was significantly influenced by Du Bois' work.

"Du Bois produced the first scientific school of modern sociology," Morris said. "He was into data collection—census data, survey data, interview data and ethnographic data. He did it all. That was a new kind of sociology, and my argument is that Du Bois was the founder of it."

Yet, Booker T. Washington, as well as other leading white scholars, including Park and sociologists at Columbia, Yale and University of Pennsylvania, disparaged and ignored Du Bois' work.

"I show in my book that two black men—W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington—profoundly influenced the trajectory of American sociology. That's a story that has never been told," Morris said.

Black scholars are often viewed as making no contributions to the founding of the discipline. However, Morris demonstrates this claim is untrue given that Du Bois pioneered modern empirical sociology while Washington blocked Du Bois' Atlanta School. Furthermore, Washington through Park, interjected his conservative ideas on race into the Chicago School, which spread throughout the academy.

"The Washingtonian view was clear: Black people should not fight for the vote nor seek social equality with whites," Morris said. "Rather, their salvation would be realized through working on farms and engaging in industrial labor useful to whites."

"The Scholar Denied" demonstrates that Du Bois not only possessed deep knowledge about race but that his scholarship profoundly affected the discipline of sociology, as well as the lives of [black people](#).

"Du Bois' argument was straightforward: Black people were not racially inferior. They were fully human with all the intellectual capacities of any racial group," Morris said. "His school of thought was based on producing research that proved black people were equal."

Du Bois was angered by the economists, sociologists and historians who failed to produce [empirical research](#) to prove black inferiority.

"Du Bois accused them of being 'car-window sociologists,'" Morris said. "They speed through the black community, gaze out the window of an automobile and return home convinced they know everything about race without doing empirical research."

An important legacy of Du Bois' scholarship is its emphasis on racial attitudes and identities. Du Bois and his colleagues researched the powerful role beliefs played in determining racial outcomes. They considered it crucial to discredit non-scientific beliefs of black inferiority. They produced scholarship uncovering the roots and social consequences of racial attitudes. Moreover, at the core of Du Bois' scholarship were sharp analyses of how racial oppression produced racial inequality.

Because of Du Bois' penetrating analyses of racism, leading white sociologists ignored and marginalized his scholarship.

"Intellectual schools of thought do not become dominant, prominent and institutionalized just because of the merit of the ideas," Morris said. "Power, money, politics and the ideology of white supremacy played a major role in which schools of thought took root. "That's also a big story

I'm telling in "The Scholar Denied."

Morris hopes that "The Scholar Denied" will inspire social scientists and humanists to produce more rigorous and critical scholarship, especially pertaining to the contemporary nature of race. Du Bois provided a model of such scholarship throughout the first six decades of the 20th century.

Provided by Northwestern University

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