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Du Bois's Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences

By LEWIS R. GORDON

ABSTRACT: One of the many challenges W.E.B. Du Bois faced in the study of African Americans was the pervasive racism that affected how social scientists acquired data on people of African descent. Moreover, the historical reality in which such data were gathered was one in which there were indications of genocidal aims on the part of the dominant population. Du Bois needed to show that African Americans should receive rigorous study and that rigorous study was a part of the struggle for African American upliftment. In his effort to address both challenges, Du Bois, in effect, developed several bases for rigorous human study that included the importance of recognizing the humanity of the subjects under study. He touched upon several central concerns in the philosophy of the human sciences including the viability of studying metastable subjects; the relationship between epistemological and ontological categories in the cultural sphere; and the lived reality of action in the face of behavioral imposition.

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IN his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois made a prognosis that has haunted the twentieth century: "Herein lie buried many things which if read in patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (1903, 41). When Du Bois wrote "Gentle Reader," he was being more than rhetorical, for this "Reader," for whom there was once presumed a lack of interest and, therefore, (falsely) a lack of relevance, is here alerted that his or her condition, being other than black, was inscribed in the core of the problems in question.

The black, whose "strange meaning" and "being" were also called into question as "the Negro problem," represented also a tension in the presumed order. Du Bois did not here write about being black but about its meaning. He announced a hermeneutical turn that would delight even his most zealous philosophical successors. This hermeneutical turn signaled a moment in a complex struggle, a moment marked by its admission of incompleteness and probably impossible closure. The black, subject to interpretation, became a designation that could be held by different groups at different times and as such was both concrete and metaphorical. If the color line is at the mercy of interpretive blackness, then its boundaries carry risks, always, of changing and overlapping. The Gentle Reader's possibilities are announced, then, as paradoxically

less fixed in their fixedness than he or she may be willing to admit. Such a Reader may intensify, then, his or her effort to take "precautions."

Du Bois's announcement has played itself out, prophetically, in this regard: race/color has marked a course through the twentieth century like a rift through the planet, while its heaps of ideological rubbish have piled themselves up, in their characteristic divides, like casualties on the Western front. Deny it as we may, as a consequence or cause of a multitude of evils, the problem of the color line is a persisting problem, a problem that, in the eyes of some, is here to stay (for example, Bell 1992). Born from the divide of black and white, it serves as a blueprint of the ongoing division of humankind. The color line is also a metaphor that exceeds its own concrete formulation. It is the race line as well as the gender line, the class line, the sexual-orientation line, the religious line—in short, the line between "normal" and "abnormal" identity.

The twentieth century was also marked by another pronouncement of grave import: the struggle for liberation and, hence, revolution. There were revolutionary struggles in Asia, decolonization struggles in Africa and the Caribbean, civil rights struggles in the United States, and indigenous struggles worldwide. Like the fate of Du Bois's announcement on color, many of the revolutionary efforts at the century's morn have fallen into ill repute at its twilight. But the forces that gave them validity haunt our present. Global economic inequality intensifies in the face of First World dismissal of the

relevance of revolution and, hence, revolutionary consciousness. We are in a sorry moment, as the question of an active consciousness, of taking a stand of resistance, has shifted its foci from systems to intrasystemic "critique." There is no longer the radical, Leninist revolutionary call of what is to be done. Instead, there is the pathetic retreat: What can one do?

Two announcements heralded the dawn of the twentieth century: identity and liberation. Despite addressing "color lines," Du Bois's explorations have charted a genealogical thematic of "fundamental" thoughts on the twentieth-century subject, of the twentieth-century self: his anguished voice was, after all, addressing problems of identity, the resolution of which later culminated to a voice of revolution. His final autobiography, *A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, charts a course from New England liberalism in Barrington, Massachusetts, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Communist internationalism in Harlem, New York, and Accra, Ghana, although the closing remarks reveal a beautiful fusion of Marxism with African American existentialism:

I just live. I plan my work, but plan less for shorter periods. I live from year to year and day to day. I expect snatches of pain and discomfort to come and go. And then reaching back to my archives, I whisper to the great majority: To the Almighty dead, into whose pale approaching faces, I stand and stare. . . . Teach living man to jeer at this last civilization which seeks to build heaven on Want and Ill of most men and vainly builds on color

and hair rather than on decency of hand and heart. Let your memories teach those wilful fools all which you have forgotten and ruined and done to death. . . . Our dreams seek Heaven, our deeds plumb Hell. Hell lies about us in our Age: blithely we push into its stench and flame. Suffer us not, Eternal Dead to stew in this Evil—the Evil of South Africa, the Evil of Mississippi; the Evil of Evils which is what we hope to hold in Asia and Africa, in the southern Americas and islands of the Seven Seas. Reveal, Ancient of Days, the Present in the Past and prophesy the End in the Beginning. . . . Let then the Dreams of the dead rebuke the Blind who think that what is will be forever and teach them that what was worth living for must live again and that which merited death must stay dead. Teach us, Forever Dead, there is no Dream but Deed, there is no Deed but Memory. (Du Bois 1968, 422-23)

Identity and liberation are two themes that lay beneath the waves of twentieth-century thought. Identity calls for the question of a being's relation to itself. Thus, we find identity questions in ontological questions, questions of being, essence, and meaning—in short, of the existential force of the question, in the end, What am I?

In the liberatory question, we head, too, through a series of philosophical turns. Although the two meet on the question of who is to be liberated, the liberating animus charts a course of value that at times transcends being, although not always essence. Liberation is a teleological concern, a concern about purpose, a concern about ought and whys: Whatever we may be, the point is to focus energy on what we ought to become.

A powerful dimension of Du Bois's work is the extent to which he straddled both the identity and liberatory divides, divides of research and divides of policy. In his writings, the search reveals the normative and the normative reveals the search. His classic essay, "The Study of the Negro Problems," which this issue of *The Annals* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science commemorates, offers several challenges on how researchers in the human sciences should go about studying racialized people. I say "racialized people" because, as we will see, the normativity achieved by some members of a racist society enables them to live as though freed of racial designation. The research challenges present a unique feature of African American thought; such thought raises the metatheoretical level of investigation even at the level of methodological involvement. This article explores some of the philosophical richness of Du Bois's argument and presents a case for its continued relevance as we face our humanity in the aftermath of a trenchant, postmodern, misanthropic era.

THE CONTEXT

In 1896, the year in which the Supreme Court of the United States affirmed segregation of the races in the landmark case of *Plessey v. Ferguson*, Du Bois, then 28 years of age, was called upon by the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a study of the black populations of the Seventh Ward, a ghetto, in the city of Phila-

delphia. Nearly seven decades later, he recounts the invitation and the situation with the sensibility of an elder attuned to both the wisdom and naïveté of his youth:

It all happened this way: Philadelphia, then and still one of the worst governed cities, was having one of its periodic spasms of reform. A thorough study of causes was called for. Not but what the underlying cause was evident to most white Philadelphians: the corrupt, semicriminal vote of the Negro Seventh Ward. Everyone agreed that here lay the cancer; but would it not be well to give scientific sanction to the known causes by an investigation, with imprimatur of the University? It certainly would, answered Samuel McCune Lindsay of the Department of Sociology. And he put his finger on me for the task. (Du Bois 1968, 194)

He continues:

If Lindsay had been a smaller man and had been induced to follow the usual American pattern of treating Negroes, he would have asked me to assist him as his clerk in this study. Probably I would have accepted having nothing better in sight for work in sociology. But Lindsay regarded me as a scholar in my own right and probably proposed to make me an instructor. Evidently the faculty demurred at having a colored instructor. But since I had a Harvard Ph.D., and had published a recognized work in history [*Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America*], the University could hardly offer me a fellowship. A compromise was hit on and I was nominated to the unusual status of "assistant" instructor. Even at that there must have been some opposition, for the invitation was not particularly cordial. I was offered a salary of \$900 for a period limited to one year. I was given no real academic stand-

ing, no official recognition of any kind; my name was eventually omitted from the catalogue; I had no contact with students, and very little with members of the faculty, even in my own department.

Nevertheless, Du Bois took the challenge:

I did not hesitate an instant but reported for duty with a complete plan of work and outline of methods and aims and even proposed schedules to be filled out. My general plan was promptly accepted and I started to work, consulting Lindsay regularly but never meeting the faculty. With my bride of three months, I settled in one room in the city over a cafeteria run by a College Settlement, in the worst part of the Seventh Ward. We lived there a year, in the midst of an atmosphere of dirt, drunkenness, poverty, and crime. Murder sat on our doorsteps, police were our government, and philanthropy dropped in with periodic advice. (194-95)

And here is his mature reflection on how he understood the so-called Negro problem in his youth:

The Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation. At the University of Pennsylvania I ignored the pitiful stipend. It made no difference to me that I was put down as an "assistant instructor," and even at that, that my name never actually got into the catalogue; it goes without saying that I did no instructing save once to pilot a pack of idiots through the Negro slums. (197)

Du Bois faced a formidable task. That he was given only a year, with-

out assistance, to present a systematic study of the black population in the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia betrayed the bad faith of the institutions that commissioned that study. In effect, Du Bois was set up to fail but with the provision that his failure count as the best possible effort to study that community and, thus, serve as affirmation of the pathologies of the community under study. In other words, Du Bois's study was to serve as a form of theodicean legitimation of Philadelphian society (and by implication, U.S. society). Theodicy is the effort to reconcile the goodness of an all-powerful deity with the existence of evil. In modern times, theodicy has been secularized through making political systems or systems of rationalization stand for the fallen god and by making social evils or contradictions stand for the annoying evils or imperfections of the system. Du Bois's labors were expected to demonstrate that Philadelphia's evils were extrasystemic, were features of the black populations, rather than intrasystemic, things endemic to the system and, hence, things done to the black populations.

We see here an ironic relation to research, for if Du Bois were successful at what he was commissioned to do, he would have been a failure at what he had set out to do, which was to find out the "truth," as it were, of the Philadelphia black population's situation. The glitch in the institution's expectations was Du Bois himself. He was, after all, W.E.B. Du Bois, the future dean of African American scholarship. That title eventually came to him from the pioneering work he produced from *The*

Philadelphia Negro (1899) through to *Black Reconstruction in America* ([1935] 1992) and other subsequent work in history, sociology, political economy, and philosophy. The 28-year-old Du Bois knew that he was hired as a lackey to legitimize policies premised upon black pathology, but, being a “race man,” he knew, as well, that opportunities for black folk to succeed instead of to fail were few and far between. He knew that any effort on his part to study and demonstrate the ordinary required extraordinary efforts, efforts that were no less than Promethean. Reflecting on the opposition he faced, he later wrote:

Of the theory back of the plan of this study of Negroes I neither knew nor cared. I saw only here a chance to study an historical group of black folks and to show exactly what their place was in the community. . . . Whites said: Why study the obvious? Blacks said: Are we animals to be dissected and by an unknown Negro at that? Yet, I made a study of the Philadelphia Negro so thorough that it has withstood the criticism of 60 years. (1968, 197)

Indeed, he had. Du Bois’s work withstood 60 years of criticism because he not only studied the black populations in Philadelphia but also questioned the study of black folk in the United States and, by implication, other anti-black societies. The paper he presented to the American Academy of Political and Social Science, “The Study of the Negro Problems” (1898b), inaugurated a profound turn in the study of human beings in the modern era. The title brought the

turn into focus succinctly by its focus on study. Du Bois, in effect, announced the metatheoretical question of how theory is formulated. There is something peculiar, he suggests at the outset, about how blacks are studied—key to consider is whether they are studied at all—which requires reflection on one’s method more than one would with populations who are normative. Practices of systematic inquiry and critical self-assessments are often put to the wayside by commentators in favor of opinionated statements of what, supposedly, must be so with regard to blacks. In effect, the Negro problems were thrown out of the sphere of human problems into the sphere of necessity premised upon pathologies. Consequently, the Negro problems often collapsed into the Negro Problem—the problem, in other words, of having Negroes around. In this regard, it was, as commentators (for example, Fanon 1967) subsequently noted, a predominantly white problem.

FROM PROBLEMATIC PEOPLE TO PEOPLE’S PROBLEMS

The problem of problematized people is well known among existential and phenomenological theorists (see Freire 1990; Gordon 1995a, 1995b, 1997a, 1997b). It can be understood in terms of the spirit of seriousness. The spirit of seriousness emerges when there is a collapse in the divide between values and the material world (compare with Gordon 1995a, chap. 6). In such instances, the material world becomes a cause of values

and vice versa. In other words, there is such an isomorphic relation between values and objects of value that they become one. Thus, the object fails any longer to signify or suggest a particular value or meaning. It becomes that value or meaning. In cases of a problematic people, the result is straightforward: they cease to be people who might face, signify, or be associated with a set of problems. They become those problems. Thus, a problematic people do not signify crime, licentiousness, and other social pathologies; they, under such a view, are crime, licentiousness, and other social pathologies (see, for example, Fanon 1967, chap. 6).

How does one study problems faced by a people without collapsing them into the problems themselves? Du Bois begins by offering a definition of social 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" (1898b, 2). That Du Bois focuses on the social is already a theoretical advance. For in his time, the tendency was to approach the study of a people in terms of either phylogenetic or ontogenic considerations. The phylogenetic focuses on species' differences where, especially with regard to the "racial" status of blacks, debate took the form of whether they were members of the human species. The ontogenic consideration had limitations in its focus on the individual organism. With such a focus, one would address simply an individual organism that works and another that fails—as are

easily found in any study of a set of human subjects—but the meaning of working and failing transcends the organism itself. The problems, matters relating to success or failure, require a third mediating consideration: the social world (compare with Fanon 1967, intro.). The social world mediates the phylogenetic and the ontogenic and presents, through the complexity of social life—life premised upon intentions, actions, and the ongoing achievement of intersubjective relations—a world of agency, deliberation, and contingency. It is a world without accident yet without, as well, necessity. It is a world that brings things into being that need not have been brought forth. By focusing on the social, then, Du Bois has, in one sweep, taken the U.S. discourse on blackness onto unfamiliar ground.

The unfamiliar ground of social analysis requires a different way of reading problems:

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. Consequently, though we ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question, students must recognize the obvious fact that this problem, like others, has had a long historical development, has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover, that it is not *one* problem, but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex; and these problems have their one bond of unity in the act that they group themselves about those Africans whom two

centuries of slave-trading brought into the land. (1898b, 3)

That social problems are not static raises the question whether it is possible to conduct systematic study of a constantly changing or metastable subject. The metastability of the subject here is a function of human reality. The human being is a subject that constantly challenges the permanent relevance of data. In effect, the tendency to stratify the Negro problem betrays a tendency to address black populations as though they were not human populations. As human populations, they are metastable. Such a reminder brings into focus an important dimension of the problem of studying black folk. For if an error in studying black folk emerges from a failure to recognize their humanity, one might think that such an error could easily be alleviated by simply studying them as human beings. The question brings into focus the problem with racial analysis. Can a racial formation be rigorously studied as a human formation?

Du Bois addresses this problem by raising another dimension of the human being that is not addressed simply by recognizing its capacity for change. After raising the social, he explores the historical specificity of blacks in the United States. The historical reality of blacks in America is one of struggling against conquest, kidnapping, enslavement, and a constant reconstruction of racial hierarchies at each moment of seeming triumph over racial oppression. The Civil War, he points out, eradicated legalized chattel slavery without

eliminating the conditions that racialized slavery in the first place. The result was, then, a reassertion of forces against the freedom of black folk. This dialectic between freedom and unfreedom is such that it raises, as well, the question of a dialectic between the past and the future. In taking heed of historical impositions and the possibilities sought in present inquiry, Du Bois brings another problem into focus—the problem of the political: “They do not share the full national life because there has always existed in America a conviction . . . that people of Negro blood should not be admitted into the group life of the nation no matter what their conditions might be” (1898b, 7).

The political problem, although not explicitly stated as such, has the consequence of political nihilism—the view that one’s political institutions are incapable of responding to one’s social needs. Such nihilism is an understandable consequence of the nation’s anxieties over black inclusion. In Du Bois’s words:

They rest . . . on the widespread conviction among Americans that no persons of Negro descent should become constituent members of the social body. This feeling gives rise to economic problems, to educational problems, and nice questions of social morality; it makes it more difficult for black men to earn a living or spend their earnings as they will; it gives them poorer school facilities and restricted contact with cultured classes; and it becomes, throughout the land, a cause and excuse for discontent, lawlessness, laziness and injustice. (1898b, 8)

A consequence of this social problem is the widespread credo, *Why bother?*

The equating of blacks with failure has played itself out over the course of the twentieth century. It is what troubled Frantz Fanon in the 1950s, when he reflected on the socio-genic conditions of failure in anti-black societies (Fanon 1967), and it was a recurring theme of the 1980s and 1990s. Cornel West (1993) has, for instance, rearticulated this problem as one of nihilism in the black community, and I have examined this problem as a larger problem of political nihilism in a postmodern world (Gordon 1997b, chap. 5). Du Bois is, however, linking the problem of nihilism to a peculiar dimension of social reality in the formation of a concept not mentioned in his seminal article but serves as its subtext—namely, oppression.

ON OPPRESSION

Oppression is a function of the number of options a society offers its members. Where there are many options, choices can be made without imploding upon those who make them. If a set of options are considered necessary for social well-being in a society, then trouble begins when and where such options are not available to all members of the society. In effect, such options have an impact on membership itself. In a world where I have only two options but everyone else has three, it is highly likely that my choices will exceed my options more quickly than would the others. Where there are only two options, I may use up two choices before I begin to make

inward, abstract choices, like “neither,” or “I will choose X or Y affirmatively or reluctantly,” and so on. Eventually, it becomes clear that to make more than two choices without collapsing onto myself and the way I make choices, I will need to expand my options. But to do so would put me in conflict with a world that has only given me two options. In effect, then, to live like everyone else places me in a situation of conflict. Here, we see the problem brought into philosophical focus. For, to live like everyone else, to live as “ordinary,” as “normal,” would require of me an “extraordinary” act—to change the system, which may require powers beyond my capacity, or to change myself, which, although a localized exercise of power, would require something of me that is not demanded of others. In either formulation, I would have to work harder than others.

That is what Du Bois means to point out in his list of hardships faced by social limitation (see, for example, Du Bois 1898b, 8). The problem is particularly stark if we consider Jim Crow. In limiting the options available for blacks in the everyday negotiation of social life, Jim Crow increased the probability of black social life being in conflict with American social life; it increased the probability of blacks breaking the law on an everyday basis. Such limited options forced every black to face choices about the self that placed selfhood in conflict with humanhood.

In the post-Jim Crow era, problems continue as the collapse of blacks into pathologies is such that it limits the options available for

blacks in civil society. Many blacks, for instance, in going about their everyday life, incur a constant risk of incarceration. Under such circumstances, blacks take extraordinary measures to live an ordinary life; an ordinary life, after all, should not involve expected encounters with the criminal justice system.

The study of the Negro problem then calls for a provocative form of human study—the study of a human population whose humanity is a structurally denied feature of the society in which they are studied. Implicit in Du Bois's call for such a study, then, is an indictment of the society itself: "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" (Du Bois 1898b, 10).

And what is the best scientific research? The best scientific research has criteria that will, at best, put into relief some (if not all) of the prejudices of the researchers. Du Bois adds to his appeal the claim that "the American Negro deserves study for the great end of advancing the cause of science in general. . . . [And those who fail to do so] hurt the cause of scientific truth the world over, they voluntarily decrease human knowledge of a universe of which we are ignorant enough" (Du Bois 1898b, 10-11). The best research is guided by a search for the universal. Data that purport to cover the human species without inclusion of blacks and other peoples of color are at best true over a subset of the human species. The humanity of

black folks, then, is a necessary addition for the rigorous practice of the human sciences.

Du Bois's insight has been repeated by many scholars and writers throughout the twentieth century. Each of them, from Alain Locke (1989) to Ralph Ellison (1987) through to the genealogical post-structural work of V. Y. Mudimbe (1988) and the black feminist arguments of bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1990) and Joy James (1996, 1997) echo this point—that the structural collapse of universality into whiteness (and masculineness) has exemplified a false universal. One may find a more complete picture of a society in those places its members often seek to avoid. In African American philosophy, for instance, one will find studies of both what (white) American philosophy is willing to face and what it is unwilling to face. In effect, it requires a reenvisioning of both what America is and what it means to do philosophy in America. The same applies to social science and the human sciences in general.

Du Bois then returns to the question of study with an addendum of humanistic study, which calls for recognizing the limitations of essentialistic claims across a social group: "What is true of the Negro in Massachusetts is not necessarily true of the Negro in Louisiana; . . . what is true of the Negro in 1850 was not necessarily true in 1750" (Du Bois 1898b, 17). He then advances two categories of study—the social group and the social environment. The four suggestions for the study of the social group—historical, statistical, anthropological measurement, and

sociological interpretation—have been hinted at in our discussion thus far. Given the impact of Hegel's introduction to his *Philosophy of History* (1956), it was a long-standing view that blacks were not historical. Du Bois's advancement of the historical here was, in this area of thought, Copernican. The quantitative suggestions were less problematic because of the dominant ideology that placed blacks in close proximity to nature. It seems odd, then, that Du Bois had to reiterate their importance. His advancement of quantitative analysis makes sense, however, if we consider another feature of the dehumanization of blacks, a feature that hits the heart of inquiry itself—namely, the impact racism has on epistemological openness and epistemological closure.

Epistemological openness pertains to the anonymity that undergirds the social dimension of each social group. A social group is such that each member can occupy the role that exemplifies it. When the theorist encounters a member of that group and identifies, usually by virtue of the role the member performs, the social group to which he or she belongs, it is good practice to restrict judgments to the context and to the social role but not over the full biography of the individual who plays that role. Those aspects remain anonymous, nameless. Thus, to pass by a student and to recognize him or her as a student need not entail the role "student" to cover the entire scope of that student's life and being. Such is the case with many other social roles and groups. There is always more that one could learn

about the individual who occupies that social role.

In the case of epistemic closure, however, the identification of the social role is all one needs for a plethora of other judgments. In effect, to know that role is to know all there is to know about the individual. In effect, there is no distinction between him or her and the social role, which makes the individual an essential representative of the entire group. The group, then, becomes pure exterior being. Its members are without "insides" or hidden spaces for interrogation. One thus counts for all. The guiding principle of avoiding the fallacy of hasty generalizations is violated here as a matter of course. Du Bois's counsel, then, is toward opening this space of inquiry.

Our turn to anonymity brings us to sociological interpretation. To break out of epistemic closure, one needs to recognize that blacks have points of view on the world. Such an approach "should aim to study those finer manifestations of social life which history can but mention and which statistics can not count, such as the expression of Negro life as found in their hundred newspapers, their considerable literature, their music and folklore and their germ of esthetic life—in fine, in all the movements and customs among them that manifest the existence of a distinct social mind" (Du Bois 1898b, 20).

The second category, the peculiar social environment, addresses the problem of options raised before. Du Bois ends the essay by issuing a call that has lost its power today in light of recent efforts to discard the study of race: "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" (Du Bois 1898b, 23). The transition from Negro to Black to Afro-American to African American has been marked, as well, by the transition from race to contemporary claims of its scientific invalidity and its so-called social and political irrelevance (for example, Appiah 1992). In response, critics have issued the same objection as Du Bois did a century ago: deny as we might the continued relevance of race and racism in the lives of large segments of the American population, how will those who continue to bear the brunt of discrimination present their case without data that identify them as targets of the discrimination?

EPISTEMIC LIMITATIONS OF RACE REPRESENTATION

The problem with data is that they must be rigorously gathered. Rigor here means that the process of gathering and interpreting data must be guided by an understanding of the challenges raised by human studies and an understanding of the logic of social action and claims of universality. Moreover, the challenge addresses the integrity of the theorist as well, especially the theorist who might be a member of the community under discussion. As Du Bois observed later in his *Soliloquy*:

I became painfully aware that merely being born in a group, does not necessarily make one possessed of complete knowledge concerning it. I had learned far more from Philadelphia Negroes than I had

taught them concerning the Negro Problem. (Du Bois 1968, 198)

A member of a group does not live his or her everyday experience in a way that constitutes the reflection of study. To study one's lived reality requires a displacement and a new set of questions about that reality that render one's experiences, at best, data to be added to the stream of data to be interpreted. But more, the theoretical questions raised may be such that there is no precedent for them, which means that by raising them, one has placed oneself outside of a privileged sphere of knowledge. How one lives in a community is not identical with the sort of knowledge involved in how one studies a community.

A striking feature of Du Bois's recommendations for rigorous study, however, is that in the midst of all his almost positivistic conceptions of objectivity in the study of black folk, there are also the hermeneutical considerations and the experiential considerations of looking at blacks from the inside. These are concerns that Du Bois himself deploys in another essay from the period, "On the Conservation of the Races" (1898a), a paper that he presented to the Negro Academy the same year in which he presented "The Study of the Negro Problems" to the American Academy of Political and Social Science. The two academies represented a historical reality that took existential and phenomenological forms in Du Bois's two essays. For it is "inside," so to speak, to a community of black intellectuals, that Du Bois brought forth the existential phenomenological

reading of the nihilistic threat of denied membership as a struggle of twoness, of two souls, of double consciousness (Du Bois [1898a] 1998, [1903] 1995; Allen 1997).

Double consciousness raises not only the experience of seeing the world from an American point of view and a black point of view, from the point of view of the black diaspora but also from the contradictions encumbered by such experience. Must "black" be anathema to "American"? What black folks experience are the contradictions of American society; it is an experience of what is denied, an experience of the contradictions between the claims of equality and the lived reality of inequality, between the claims of justice and the lived reality of systematic and systemic injustice, between the claims of a universal normativity and the lived reality of white normativity, between the claims of blacks not having any genuine points of view and the lived reality of blacks' point of view on such claims (compare with Gordon 1998).

By raising the question of black problems from blacks' point of view, Du Bois raised the question of an "inside" that required an approach to social phenomena that puts the theorist in a position to break down the gap between himself or herself and the subjects of study. For in principle if the theorist can imagine the black point of view as a point of view that can be communicated, then already a gap between the theorist and the black subject of study has been bridged. The theorist, whether white or of color, must work with the view

of communicability and, simultaneously, a process of interrogation that will bring forth what black subjects are willing to divulge. In short, the method presupposes agency, freedom, and responsibility, which transforms the epistemological expectations of inquiry. From the "outside," one could receive limited data. From the "inside," one could, as well, receive limited data. Combined, one receives "good" data, "solid" data, "rigorously acquired" data, but never "complete" data. It is by staying attuned to the incompleteness of all data with regard to human beings that one makes the approach humanistic. It is a method that reveals that, when it comes to the human being, there will always be more to learn and, hence, more to research.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Our times are marked by a profound divide in approaches to human study. The sentiments, as we have seen, gear toward total abandonment of liberatory questions in favor of identity questions. Without the liberatory calling, identity questions become struggles over definition or the rejection of definitions, ironically, on supposedly purely theoretical grounds. The result has been, on one hand, the continued, often reactionary influence of neopositivistic approaches, where the effort is to imitate the natural sciences through quantitative conceptions of objectivity. At the other extreme is the post-modern rejection of all "totalizations" and concepts like "progress" and "rigor" and even the adjective

"human" in human study. There, hermeneutics or interpretation has taken a path to the seemingly trivial (Rickman 1998). For African Americans, the situation is particularly moribund, for how could a denial of humanity benefit a people who have spent more than 300 years struggling for it? How can African Americans take seriously the constructivity of their situation when social reality continues to smack them in the face as a reality that is hardly fictitious? And as for neopositivism, with its demand of value neutrality, a similar criticism applies: it is only the powerful who can afford a world devoid of value since they are already situated in a position to be its beneficiary.

Neopositivism and postmodernism are not, however, the only alternatives. Interpretations can be socially situated by the complex network of questions that pertain to the study of the human being as a metastable subject that is coextensive with a set of values, including the values of freedom and expectations for the sort of life appropriate to mature members of a society. I say mature because without a coherent conception of maturity, all members of a social group, regardless of age, would be infantilized and, hence, problematic. Such an approach requires both taking seriously the conditions of objectivity raised by the intersubjective dynamics of the social world and the existential problematic of how human beings live. I have argued elsewhere that such a call is for an existential sociology (Gordon 1997b, chap. 4).

Now, a century after Du Bois's *encomia*, we face a population called

African Americans. This population has been studied to the point of serving, throughout the twentieth century, as the bedrock of much sociological and anthropological work. That African Americans have been reinscribed into the grammar of race signification is such that the forces that precipitated the Negro problems are clearly problems that have made their way to the dawn of another century.

In his later years, Du Bois came to the conclusion that the study of a problem was a necessary but insufficient means of eliminating it. He did, as is well known, defy the adage of radicalism in youth and conservatism in old age by reversing its order. Du Bois became a revolutionary because, in the end, he saw that knowledge by itself does not compel action. For knowledge to become effective, it needs to achieve a degree of historical force. Part of the Du Boisian legacy is the rich body of texts on which to build our contemporary understanding of people of African descent. In effect, he contributed to the epistemic project of transforming a population of people through transforming the conditions of historic recognition. While the struggle for new social relations continues, the project of humanistic study is such that the possibilities offered by a richer understanding of human diversity may help set afoot, as well, the world for which Du Bois so faithfully struggled. It is with such thoughts in mind that I come to a close with a repetition of his words:

Let then the Dreams of the dead rebuke the Blind who think that what is will be forever and teach them that what was worth living for must live again and that which merited death must stay dead.

Teach us, Forever Dead, there is no Dream but Deed, there is no Deed but Memory. (Du Bois 1968, 422-23)

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