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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs**Nasar Meer** 

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Abstract

How might we move the current discussion of W.E.B Du Bois from a concern with *omission* to *re-construction* within modern social theory? Bhambra and Holmwood offer a novel means to do this through revisiting three texts: *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935). The following account explores the benefits of this approach, what it highlights for students and teachers, and discusses where other emphases might also lead a contemporary understanding of Du Bois.

Keywords

Citizenship, domination, double-consciousness, Hegel, race

One of the prevailing ways that new readers may have encountered W.E.B Du Bois in recent years, and especially in the discipline of sociology, is through attempts to redress the ‘public secret’ (Taussig, 1999) of his omission from the canonical work of social and political science (e.g. Morris, 2015; Zuckerman, 2004). To some extent, Bhambra and Holmwood’s (2021) discussion shares this corrective concern, but seeks to emphasize not only that which is omitted. Their project is the more generative activity of explaining how and in what ways re-centring W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) will broaden the very aperture of social and political analysis across the social sciences. In this respect, their focus on Du Bois is a distilled example of both the excellence and importance of their book at large.

In their treatment of Du Bois they pursue this in a remarkably concise fashion, working through parts of three key texts: *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935). These particular contributions span his pioneering work in, amongst other areas, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, especially social statistics and urban ethnography; they demonstrate how Du Bois reconciled questions of political economy with social movements, and also foregrounded relationships between the self and society, doing so in ways that prefigure later ‘classics’.

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Taken together, they offer an account that meets their intended objective in allowing for a movement of Du Boisian social theory ‘from a deep and embodied engagement with a specific society organized around racialized differences to a universal claim about the construction of the global “colour line” in colonialism’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 178). To my mind moreover, there are three qualities of their reading that I would especially emphasize as points of orientation (or reorientation) for relative new comers to these topics, and one area of possible disagreement.

Firstly, there is a welcome threading together of Du Bois’s public intellectualism alongside his rigorous scholarship. I personally take the view that the very rich (and sometimes contentious) debate about the many lives of Du Bois can become something of a distraction from the force of his argument. This is especially the case when discussants seek to compartmentalize his contribution to one mode or another – as in Patricia Hill Collins’s (2016: 1402) compelling argument that ‘Du Bois’s social science developed in the way that it did because he was outside professional sociology. He escaped the burdens of being a canonical figure or of contesting the canonical knowledge of sociological insiders’.

While Bhambra and Holmwood (2021: 188) do not dwell on this directly, what they are able to show is a *mutual dependency* between different modes of intellectual discovery and critique. This is perhaps most keenly brought together in their expansive reading of the idea of emancipation, which ‘for Du Bois meant more than simple freedom from enslavement’, for it ‘required social and economic equality alongside suffrage’. The point being this impulse alternated and played as much a role in his public intellectualism, which in turn did not abdicate the rigours of method. There is a mutually supporting reading in the argument advanced by Morris (2015: 188), in that through an explicitly public oriented approach, Du Bois was engendering a type of ‘liberation capital’ which then circled back to his work in Atlanta University to ‘initiate and sustain the research programme of a nonhegemonic scientific school’.

Secondly, and not entirely unrelated to the last point, they foreground precisely what was at stake in the dispute with Booker T. Washington. On more than one occasion I have come across the presentation of Du Bois’s opposition to Washington as a case of two ‘great men’ vying for influence. Such cursory treatments miss the historical significance of what Du Bois was resisting in Washington’s ‘Atlanta Compromise’, which would promote ‘only vocational education and skills training’, but would do so in ways that would preclude the participation of African Americans ‘in the nation through self-assertion, to become a citizen as an African American, and to expand the meaning of citizenship (and democracy) on that basis’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 190). One of these things Du Bois saw in Washington’s approach was a new form of indentured labour, and its connection to the virtue of education is well covered in their discussion.

Thirdly, Bhambra and Holmwood highlight in their discussion of Du Bois his ‘poetic allusion’, by which I take to mean the aesthetic materials in his writing. These were never minor features, memorably illustrated of course in the musical notations that open each chapter in the *Souls of Black Folk*. While Du Bois was not a figure who saw the discovery of the aesthetic as a solution to the problem of living, a sonic and visual vocabulary were undoubtedly part of his social and political science, and often a means of naming what today we call ‘affect’. It was through his ‘poetic allusions’ that he de-personalized

affective emotions, and these remain surprisingly under recognized features of his contribution. ‘Emotions’ in this meaning are not reducible to individual psychology but, rather, operate, in Ahmed’s (2004: 119) terms, ‘in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and collective’. Du Bois recognized this when he tried to bring together the affective trauma of systemic racism. One key ‘poetic allusion’ was that racial injustice creates ‘a second sight’ (Du Bois, 1999 [1903]: 10–11), a way of seeing things that escapes the notice of the majority, specifically the distance between democratic ideals and the practice of racial exclusion. As a consequence, ‘once in a while’, he described of Black Americans, ‘through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that Americans cannot’ (Du Bois, 1971: 416).

It is on a point related to this, however, where there may be more critical disagreement between us. This has to do with whether there is anything more than ‘an echo of Hegel and the master-slave relation’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 186) in Du Bois’s idea of ‘double consciousness’. At issue in this question is quite a profound matter of epistemic provenance, and specifically whether or not we teach Du Bois as being in a constructive and creative engagement with Hegelian phenomenology.

We should reject ‘vindicationist’ approaches tracing Du Bois’ alleged debts to European ‘greats’ (Reed, 1997: 12), and especially those that see Du Bois as having straightforwardly adopted a Hegelian approach in a manner that minimizes how this aspect of Du Bois’ work also reflected remarkable intellectual originality (cf Meer, 2019: 49–51).

We should not do this, however, in ways that overlook a type of dialectical dialogue (rather than a genealogy) which Du Bois himself later credited as encouraging him to ‘understand the real meaning of scientific research and the dim outline of methods of employing its technique and its results in the new social sciences for the settlement of the Negro problems in America’ (Du Bois, 1968: 160).

Amongst the reasons I would emphasize this approach, and not primarily an ‘emerging idea of the social self, associated with pragmatism’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 186), is that Du Bois not only elaborated notions of the social-self prior to symbolic interactionists or other action theorists, he also accounted for this relationship as being ‘predicated on domination, such that the refusal of others to acknowledge one’s humanity or faculty to contribute something meaningful, inevitably underscores a sense of alienation’ (Meer, 2010: 41). There is an indisputable Hegelian feature to this insofar as Du Bois sees something unique about the consciousness of the self among African-Americans, which Du Bois would later describe as having helped him to grasp how Blackness ‘in America is a matter of spirit and not simply of flesh’ (Du Bois, 1974 [1928]: 19).

As such I think it better to narrate the emergence of Du Bois’s self as emerging both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ an unfolding development of pragmatist thought, and precisely in order to ‘give a better understanding of the categories they have bequeathed to us’ (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021: 215). Of course this discussion is one we are far better equipped to have by virtue of this book, one that tells bigger stories through detailed and focussed chapters, and which does so much to ‘make flesh’ our missing meanings in normative social and political theory today.

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