Introduction

Who’s afraid of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois? In the words of leading Du Boisian sociologist Aldon Morris, he was a “scholar denied.” He was also a radical activist, and, by the end of his life, a political outcast. Despite his being the founder of American empirical sociology and one of the most important social theorists of both his time and ours, sociologists have ignored him and his work. Today, the American Sociological Association’s lifetime scholarly achievement award bears his name: the W. E. B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award. Yet sociologists barely read his work, and its implications for the discipline today are rarely if ever discussed. This book aims to address these silences. It asks two questions: What was Du Bois’s sociology, and what are its implications for the present?

Our first goal is to present and discuss Du Bois’s sociological work. The discipline is belatedly starting to acknowledge the fact that Du Bois was one of the founders of sociology. Whereas Marx gave primacy to class, Weber to rationalization and bureaucracy, and Durkheim to solidarity and social order, Du Bois regarded race, racism, and colonialism as central to the construction of the modern world. For Du Bois, race was both the by-product and a central element of the cultural and economic organization of racial and colonial capitalism; it erected an intangible yet very real barrier: the “color line.” It is from this premise that Du Bois’s entire sociological program emerged. However, he did not just propose a sociology of race. For Du Bois, race was not a subfield of the discipline. Rather, he developed a sociological approach that puts racism and colonialism at the center of sociological analysis, contending that they were the pillars upon which the modern world was constructed. In this way, W. E. B. Du Bois was a theorist of racialized modernity.

We undertook this endeavor because we believe that Du Bois’s work is of critical importance to the discipline of sociology, not only to redress
the history of the discipline or for intellectual reparations purposes but because his sociology is deeply relevant to the present.

Our second goal is to encourage our readers to join a conversation about developing a contemporary Du Boisian sociology. Du Bois's sociology was, as Morris describes, “a path not taken” by the discipline; we believe it is time for the discipline to take that path. But for that to happen, we must first learn about his work by reading the full scope of his oeuvre. Furthermore, a contemporary Du Boisian sociology would have to go beyond Du Bois and incorporate ideas and issues raised by others, issues and ideas that he did not address or even anticipate. This would be in keeping with a Du Boisian spirit, as he was a self-reflective scholar who wrote extensively about how his ideas and opinions changed and evolved as he encountered new challenges. This book is a guide for those sociologists who want to embark on this journey. And it is an invitation to take part in a conversation about what it means for sociology to take a Du Boisian path in the present day.

A Scholar Activist, an Activist Scholar

The circumstances of one's life are unquestionably important in forging a person's thoughts. We are social creatures, and so are our ways of thinking about the world; that is one of sociology's basic premises. Du Bois consistently brought his personal experiences into his reflections and relied on his biography for his analysis. He wrote profusely about his life and about how his thinking changed along with the circumstances of his life. He wrote two autobiographies, *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940, and *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, written when he was in his nineties, published first in Russian in 1962 and only posthumously in English in 1968. There are also autobiographical reflections to be found in *Darkwater* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. In addition, Du Bois's essay “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” written in 1944, traces the evolution of his thought and his activism from the 1890s through the 1930s. Thus it is necessary to know something about Du Bois's life in order to understand his sociology. For that reason, we begin by highlighting key moments of his life as a scholar, organizer, and activist that shaped his thought. These highlights, though, cannot replace the reading of the excellent biographical works on his life written by David Levering Lewis.
There are two things about Du Bois's life that are important to emphasize. The first is that he was both a scholar activist and an activist scholar. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it, “It was never possible to know where the scholar Du Bois ended and the organizer Du Bois began.” For Du Bois there was no contradiction between these roles. During his lifetime, he was always a scholar, a public intellectual, an activist, and an organizer. His scholarship was dedicated to dismantling the “color line,” a term that he used to refer to the centrality of racialization and race in structuring social relations, and his activism drew from and informed his scholarship.

The second point to emphasize is that Du Bois’s life and scholarship were, on the one hand, profoundly rooted in the African American experience and at the same time deeply global and decolonial in their aims. Du Bois’s thinking and activism were rooted in the experience of American racism. He learned a bit about the color line in Great Barrington, the small town in western Massachusetts where he was born, and a great deal at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he began his undergraduate studies in 1885. Much of his activism was focused on achieving political and civil rights and economic opportunity for African Americans in the United States. At the same time, and starting very early on during the time he spent at the University of Berlin (1892–94), he understood that the color line was a global structure. From then on he became a global thinker and a global activist fighting against colonialism and for freedom and equality for all people of color and colonized people around the world.

One example of this is Du Bois’s participation in the First Pan-African Conference, held in 1900, where he delivered the conference’s collective message to the world, entitled “To the Nations of the World.” He went on to organize four Pan-African Congresses between 1919 and 1927, and he was named the international president of the Fifth Pan-African Congress, which met in Manchester, England, in 1945. In addition, because he could not attend the event personally, he sent an address to the All African People Congress that met in 1958 in Accra, capital of the newly independent Ghana. He dedicated the last years of his life to advocating Pan Africanism.

For Du Bois, the color line affected all people of color and all colonized people around the world, and he wrote extensively about past,
present, and possible future connections between Africa and Asia. As a scholar and an activist, Du Bois belongs not only to the United States but also to the Africana diaspora and the Global South as a whole.

The details of the life of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois help us understand how he came to develop his worldview. Du Bois was born in 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He was raised by his mother, a humble Black woman who worked as a cleaner; his father had left the family when Du Bois was a young child. In his Autobiography he remembers a town divided by race but also by class, where the poorest were actually the Irish factory workers. According to Du Bois’s recollection, “In Great Barrington there were perhaps twenty-five, certainly not more than fifty, colored folk in a population of five thousand,” with his family being among the oldest inhabitants of the region. After his mother’s sudden death during his senior year of high school, through the initiative of prominent white people in Great Barrington, local churches raised money to enable him to go to college. It was there, at Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee, a Black college, where Du Bois’s racial consciousness was tempered in the fire of the South.

During his time in the South, Du Bois learned that the United States was divided into two worlds, one white and one Black. Through expressed choice, he made his home in the one to which he was ascribed. The experience of encountering the color line is the first and most basic intellectual component of Du Bois’s thought and makes him part of the large group of thinkers that constitutes the Black Radical Tradition, a group that also includes, among others, C. L. R. James, Lorraine Hansberry, Frantz Fanon, and Amie Cesairé.

After earning his undergraduate degree from Fisk, he matriculated at Harvard, where he was admitted only as a junior even though he already had a college degree. At Harvard, the philosopher and psychologist William James had a strong influence on Du Bois and was responsible for steering him away from philosophy and toward the social sciences. James’s pragmatism represents a second lasting intellectual influence on Du Bois—the first being his lived experience of the color line.

A scholarship he received during his graduate studies led to a year and a half in Berlin. At the time Germany represented the peak of the academic world, and Du Bois remembered with irony how he “derived
a certain satisfaction in learning that the University of Berlin did not recognize a degree even from Harvard University, no more than Harvard did from Fisk. At the University of Berlin, he spent time with the Verein für Socialpolitik, a group of scholars who addressed social policy issues. It was in this group’s meetings that he became acquainted with the German sociologist Max Weber. Du Bois was particularly influenced by the work of Gustav Schmoller, who advocated an inductive empirical approach to the analysis of social problems. Schmoller’s inductive empiricism was a third intellectual influence on Du Bois, and its imprint can be seen in his empirical research program.

It was while studying in Germany that Du Bois realized that the color line was global, place-specific, and rooted in unequal power relations that were the result of European colonial expansion. At that point, however, his criticism of that world was confined to the place of Black people within that global order. His perspective eventually evolved into a full-blown critique of the system itself, not simply his position within it. Over time he developed a perspective that identified colonialism and racism as the structuring elements of historical capitalism. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Du Bois received his PhD from Harvard in 1894, making him the first African American to receive a doctorate from that university. He was one of America’s best-trained scholars, having studied at two of the world’s top universities. Yet, he was only able to secure a job at Wilberforce College in Ohio, teaching Greek and Latin. He proposed developing a sociology course there, but to his disappointment, the college showed no interest in such a course. In 1896, Du Bois was invited by the University of Pennsylvania to conduct a study of the Black community in Philadelphia, an opportunity that he seized immediately. His time in Pennsylvania resulted in *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1899, the first empirical urban and community study in American sociology. But Penn invited Du Bois to be only an assistant instructor and did not even offer him an office in the Department of Sociology while he carried out his study, let alone a permanent job.

In 1897, Du Bois accepted a job at Atlanta University, where he led the Atlanta sociology lab until 1910. While at Atlanta, he edited and published a series of annual research reports on Black communities, known as the Atlanta Studies, and conducted other rural and community stud-
ies. In fact, he envisioned a hundred years’ research program, consisting of ten-year cycles with studies on ten selected topics, with each study to be replicated every decade. At the same time, he published seminal works exploring theories of race. For example, in 1909, he published *John Brown*, his biography of the famous abolitionist. This work represented Du Bois’s first attempt to address the study of whiteness, which would become one of his central and unacknowledged contributions to the field of sociology.

As the early twentieth century advanced, Du Bois saw his research funding reduced, a development that he attributed to his feud with Booker T. Washington, which occurred during the early years of the century. This was one of Du Bois’s well-known political disputes. At the time, Booker T. Washington was the founder and president of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) and the gatekeeper of the philanthropic funds that came from white northerners to southern institutions. In his famous 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech, Washington urged Blacks in the South to accept the racist political and social order that existed at the time and to concentrate on improving their situation through industrial and vocational training.

Du Bois did not accept this approach. In his opinion, Black people had to demand political and civil rights and access to higher education to develop their own elites who would lead to the uplift of their people, describing these elites as the Talented Tenth. Du Bois included an essay in *The Souls of Black Folk* in which he criticized Washington, an essay that brought their differences into the open. Incidentally, Booker T. Washington’s ghost writer was none other than Robert Ezra Park, the founder of the Chicago School of Sociology.

In addition to feuding with Washington, Du Bois found that his attitude toward detached academic research was evolving. At the beginning of his career, influenced by the pragmatists’ approach to change that he studied at Harvard and the inductive empiricism that he studied in Berlin, Du Bois believed that by providing scientific evidence on the conditions of the Black community, he could persuade white elites to work toward undoing the racist social order. During his years in Philadelphia and Atlanta, he realized that this was not the case. Du Bois came to understand that no amount of the most well-researched empirical evidence would persuade whites to remove existing racial barriers. As a result, he
became increasingly involved in activism and organizing. He was one of the founders of the Niagara Movement, a Black civil rights organization that later merged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group of which Du Bois was also a founder.

In 1910, he abandoned Atlanta and became the founder and director of the NAACP's new journal, the *Crisis*, which, during his twenty years of leadership, became the most important intellectual journal in the Black community. Du Bois, however, never stopped being a sociologist, and he continued writing sociological works after he left Atlanta. In 1915 he published *The Negro*, the first of three books in which he assessed the history and position of the Africana diaspora in the modern world. In 1920, he published *Darkwater*, a collection of essays interspersed with poetry. Two essays in this volume, “The Souls of White Folk” and “The Hands of Ethiopia,” advanced the phenomenological study of whiteness and its relation to colonialism. The essay titled “The Damnation of Women” pointed to his early awareness of the specificity of questions involving gender.


I fell back upon my Royce and James and deserted Schmoller and Weber. I saw the action of physical law in the actions of men; but I saw more than that: I saw rhythms and tendencies; coincidences and probabilities; and I saw that, which for want of any other word, I must in accord with the strict tenets of Science, call Chance. I went forward to build a sociology, which I conceived of as the attempt to measure the element of Chance in human conduct. This was the Jamesian pragmatism, applied not simply to ethics, but to all human action, beyond what seemed to me, increasingly, the distinct limits of physical law.

In this book we argue that both James and Schmoller were always part of Du Bois’s sociology. The question of the role and scope of agency, the understanding of subjectivity, and the need to gather empirical data were always elements of Du Bois’s sociology, elements that took a more or less central place in different situations and at different moments of his life.
It was during his years at the NAACP that Du Bois was involved in an important political confrontation with Marcus Garvey, the Jamaica-born political leader, journalist, and orator. This confrontation was more complex than the one with Booker T. Washington in that it involved different styles of leadership. Garvey was a charismatic leader of the masses; Du Bois was a prudish and sometimes aloof intellectual. Garvey supporters were mostly working class; Du Bois appealed more to the middle class. In the end, their relationship evolved into mutual aggression and bitter recrimination.

While both Garvey and Du Bois embraced Pan-Africanism and Black identity, they did so in very different ways. Garvey advocated Black separatism, the return to Africa, and the development of Black businesses. Du Bois, at that time, advocated integration, education, and civil and political rights for Blacks in the United States. Although he was a Pan-African activist and embraced a connection with the Africana diaspora and people of color around the world, he asserted that the struggle of African Americans was for integration and full equality in the United States. This confrontation is important because, as time passed, Du Bois would come close to some of Garvey’s positions, although with different justifications than the ones Garvey used.

By the 1930s, Du Bois’s views on how to address the pervasiveness of racism in the United States had shifted yet again. He had become increasingly pessimistic about the possibilities of integration overcoming the depth of racism in the short term. In 1934, Du Bois abandoned his work at the NAACP over political differences regarding its integrationist policy, which he believed was not working. At that point Du Bois was arguing that Black people in America should develop their own cooperative economy. Although this position was close to Garvey’s, Du Bois did not argue for this approach on the grounds of Black nationalism, as Garvey did, but rather as a strategy for community survival until such time as Black people could be full citizens and equal members in American society. And Du Bois did not simply advocate the development of Black businesses, as Garvey did, but rather the development of a cooperative economy, a belief that reflected his socialist leanings.

After leaving the NAACP, Du Bois returned to Atlanta University, where he served as chairman of the Department of Sociology from 1934 to 1944. It is important for sociologists to note this fact, given that many
argue that Du Bois left the discipline when he first left Atlanta in 1910. At Atlanta University, he started a publication called *Phylon*, an interdisciplinary journal on issues of race and culture that is still being published today. He also tried to revive his community studies research program by involving the Black land-grant colleges in a broad program of empirical research. He hoped that this research program would generate information that would help address the question of Black unemployment and, in particular, help lead to the development of a self-supporting community economy, which was the focus of his efforts. His forced retirement from Atlanta University in 1944 prevented this program from coming to fruition.

During his second tenure at Atlanta University, Du Bois also published important books that reflect the broad scope of his work. *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935, showcases his encounter with the ideas of Karl Marx. Marxism was the fourth and final important intellectual tradition that influenced Du Bois’s thinking, along with the Black Radical Tradition, James’s pragmatism, and Schnuller’s inductive empiricism. But Du Bois incorporates Marxism in a creative way and in his own terms. In *Black Reconstruction*, he developed an analysis of the intersection of class and race in the American social structure in the nineteenth century, and he argued that the enslaved Black people, rather than the North or the abolitionists, were the actors of their own emancipation. Furthermore, Du Bois presents a theory of the racial state that views the end of Reconstruction as a result of a convergence of class and racial interests between the northern bourgeoisie and the southern white elites and poor that reconstituted the white ruling bloc. The difference between the early and late Du Bois is the incorporation of Marx’s ideas and the critique of racial and colonial capitalism as a historical system.

His 1940 book, *Dusk of Dawn*, analyzes the place of race in the modern world through an examination of his own life history. This book is an early example of what today we call auto-ethnography, and it shows how lived experience can be used for theoretical analysis. *Dusk* advances the phenomenological study of the Black and white experience and puts it in the historical context of Du Bois’s life—prefiguring C. Wright Mills’s argument that the sociological imagination aims to put biography in the context of history and social structure.
In 1944, Du Bois was forcefully retired from Atlanta University, as his institutional support within the university disappeared. After his dismissal from Atlanta, Du Bois returned to the NAACP and focused his work on promoting Pan Africanism, long a personal passion. During these years, he published two important books in which he developed his anticolonial thinking. *Color and Democracy*, published in 1945, presents an analysis of colonialism at the end of World War II and urges the architects of the new international order to address the colonial question. The book also presents an analysis of the intersection of class, race, and the state in the colonial order. Perhaps more importantly, his 1947 work, *The World and Africa*, situates the history of Africa and the slave trade within a global relational world history. In this book, Du Bois elaborates on the idea that the exploitation of racialized and colonial labor was a core element that structured the capitalist world system. These books present Du Bois’s theoretical analysis of the racial and colonial character of historical capitalism in its most developed form.

Pan-Africanism was a constant in Du Bois’s thinking, but his understanding of the concept also changed over the years. In his early Pan-African work, Du Bois expressed his belief that Black Americans would lead their African brethren into the modern world, much as the Talented Tenth would lead the African American masses. In his later years, however, he came to believe that it was the African anticolonial movement that would lead the Africana diaspora. His understanding of the movement’s goal also changed. Rather than pursuing a belief in uplifting Africa and the Africana diaspora into Western modernity, Du Bois started to seek answers to the questions of how to build independent nations within the historical institutions of African societies that promoted a collectivist orientation. In his late years, Du Bois became convinced that Western models of development did not provide a path forward for newly independent African nations.

In the post–World War II years, Du Bois was also an activist for world peace and against nuclear weapons. His activism included a run for the US Senate in 1950 in New York on the ticket of the American Labor Party. A difficult event in his late life was his indictment and federal trial in 1951 for his activities as chair of the Peace Information Center. He was acquitted of all charges, but the course of the trial affected him. He expected the Talented Tenth to come to his defense. Instead, he found...
that given the fears aroused by the Red Scare, many of his friends and colleagues in the struggle for civil rights distanced themselves from him. His disappointment about this turn of events comes through clearly in his writings. In fact, Du Bois’s left turn, which ultimately led him to join the Communist Party—his last act before permanently leaving the United States—distanced him from the established civil rights organizations and their leadership.

Despite his acquittal, Du Bois’s passport was revoked, and he was not allowed to travel abroad until 1958, a situation that forced him to decline many invitations to speak at international gatherings. Du Bois was invited to address the 1955 Bandung conference in Indonesia, whose purpose represented Du Bois’s ideal of African and Asian cooperation, but he could not attend that event. He also could not attend the 1957 ceremonies marking Ghana’s independence, to which he was invited by Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of Ghana’s independence movement and a strong proponent of Pan-Africanism. On that occasion Du Bois wrote to Nkrumah, calling upon the new African states to build a socialism based on communal African practices. When the United States government finally returned Du Bois’s passport to him in 1958, he traveled to the Soviet Union and to China. In both countries he was received by their top leaders—then Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong.

The invitations to address the Bandung conference and attend the celebration of Ghana’s independence, along with the fact that he was received by the heads of states of world powers, point to the stature that Du Bois had toward the end of his life as a Pan-Africanist and anticolonial thinker and activist. This is important to note because people sometimes remember him only for his writings on the Talented Tenth or on double consciousness, and the global and anticolonial dimensions of Du Bois’s thinking and activism are missed. He was a man of the Global South.

Toward the end of his life, Du Bois embraced socialism and focused his activism on Pan-Africanism and anticolonial solidarity. The latter was particularly the case after his 1951 trial, when he perceived that important segments of the Black elites in the United States had abandoned him. But his support for socialism was always rooted in the experience of the Africana diaspora and colonized people. The color line was at the root of Du Bois’s understanding of modernity, but his thinking on how
to undo it evolved. He had always understood the color line as global, but in his early years he was a pragmatist who believed that science could show whites the errors of their ways and that Black elites could uplift the masses. Over time, he came to understand the color line as intrinsic to colonial and racial capitalism, and he thought that decolonization, African-centered development, and socialism were the ways to undo it.

In 1961 Nkrumah invited Du Bois to travel to Ghana to direct the writing of the Encyclopedia Africana. At the age of ninety-three, Du Bois decided to accept the invitation and moved to Ghana to undertake a new project. He died there, a Ghanaian citizen, in 1963. There he received a state funeral. Paradoxically, it was Du Bois and not Garvey who ended his days in Africa. As Martin Luther King Jr. remarked, Du Bois “died in exile, praised sparingly and in many circles ignored. But he was an exile only to the land of his birth. He died at home in Africa among his cherished ancestors, and he was ignored by a pathetically ignorant America but not by history.”

Du Bois was a unique individual who produced a monumental oeuvre, more than most people can even imagine. Yet it is important to note that he did not work alone. He was a mentor, a teacher, a collaborator, and an organizer, a person deeply embedded in intellectual and activist networks. At Atlanta, as Aldon Morris and Earl Wright II have shown, he created a school, working with others such as Monroe Work, Richard R. Wright, George Haynes, and Mary Ovington. As an organizer of the Atlanta conferences, he invited and conversed with leading scholars of his time, among them Franz Boaz and Jane Addams. He also conversed with such leading Black feminists as Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper, from whom he undoubtedly learned, although probably not enough. As a civil rights and Pan-African activist, Du Bois was in the center of the organizing networks of important international gatherings. Toward the end of his life, his friendships with Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore were central in shaping his vision of a Pan-African socialism.

Du Bois’s was a fascinating life that encompassed the whole world—from Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to Accra, Ghana, from Atlanta, Georgia, to Berlin, Germany, from New York City to Beijing, China. As a thinker and an organizer, he participated in some of the most important political debates of his time in not only the United States but the
whole world. His writing was prolific and his oeuvre is immense. Yet at the same time, he was always embedded in networks of intellectual exchange and collaboration.

**Du Bois’s Critical Sociology**

While Du Bois developed the first sociology school, his contributions were not appreciated by the discipline. As sociologist Aldon Morris points out, Du Bois’s sociology represented “a path not taken.” More than a century after his early work, scholars continue to argue that Du Bois’s contribution to the emergence of American sociology should be recognized by the discipline. Two scholars in particular have led this charge. Morris in *The Scholar Denied* details how Du Bois built a school of empirical scientific sociology in Atlanta well before the Chicago School built a sociology based on community and urban studies, and how the gatekeepers of the discipline intentionally excluded Du Bois and his research from the mainstream. Earl Wright II, in his 2016 book, *The First American School of Sociology: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory*, describes the depth and scope of the pioneering research that Du Bois and his collaborators conducted to study Black life through the Atlanta University Studies. This book shows how the Atlanta School pioneered empirical research methods that later on became part of the mainstream tools of sociology. A third relevant work is Reiland Rabaka’s *Against Epistemic Apartheid: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Disciplinary Decadence of Sociology*, published in 2010. Rabaka is not a sociologist and his book has not made inroads in the discipline, yet it is important because it presents a detailed analysis of Du Bois’s early empirical sociological work.

With few exceptions, however, previous sociological studies of Du Bois have focused on his urban and community studies conducted between 1896 and 1910, particularly *The Philadelphia Negro* and, recently, the Atlanta University Studies. In fact, at the beginning of his career Du Bois carried out systematic community studies on the Black population in America, and making use of these studies, he came to propose a unique methodological approach that combined history, statistical analysis, and sociological interpretation. This approach was different from the one developed at Chicago two decades later in that it placed
the social actions of individuals and communities within their historical context, emphasized the structural constraints created by the color line, and paid attention to the agency of Black people.

But from the very beginning Du Bois was a social theorist as much as a groundbreaking empirical sociologist. He was the first social theorist to analyze the historical and social construction of race, its interaction with economic inequality and social class, the phenomenology of racialized lived experience, and the working of the racial state, a political institution in which race is the organizing principle. While Du Bois’s thinking was based on his experience as a Black person in the United States, his understanding of race and racialization, meaning the ongoing process of making race, was global. Du Bois saw racialization and colonialism as global processes that constructed a historical system of exploitation, oppression, and dispossession of people of color. At the same time, he always emphasized that racialized people had the possibility of agency to try to take control of their lives and their communities, in spite of the constraints imposed by the racist societies in which they lived.

The first sentence of a recent book by the sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, titled The Racial Order, asserts that “there has never been a comprehensive and systematic theory of race.” Unlike most contemporary sociologists, these authors have read Du Bois extensively and cite a wide range of his works. They rightly credit him with developing many research lines on race, but conclude that he was not consistent and systematic in his theorizing. Contrary to Emirbayer and Desmond, we argue that Du Bois did in fact develop a theoretical perspective that put racialization, colonialism, and coloniality at the center of the understanding of modernity and sociological theorizing. Furthermore, while Emirbayer and Desmond offer a theory of race that can be extended to different social fields, such as gender, ethnicity, or class, Du Bois’s theorizing is rooted in history and context, and arose through the analysis of a particular historical social formation—racialized modernity.

Key Concepts

It is important to emphasize that Du Bois’s sociology was not a sociology of race but a critique of racialized modernity. To fully grasp his
original sociological approach, it is necessary to understand how he used key theoretical concepts. This section introduces the main concepts that build Du Bois’s theoretical frame. To help the reader, the glossary at the end of the book presents short descriptions of these concepts and their use throughout the book.

Racialized Modernity

Modernity is a vague concept used to refer to our contemporary historical period. Different scholars define modernity by reference to various social processes, including the growth of urbanization and industrialization, the rise of bureaucracy, the application of science and technology to production and everyday life, the deepening of the division of labor, and the spread of secularization and democracy. Modernity is seen as a positive phenomenon, usually linked to ideas of progress and civilization and to the image of a successful present or a desirable future. This teleological vision of a historical trajectory lies behind Marx’s historical laws of motion of capitalism, Durkheim’s transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, Weber’s rise of bureaucracy and rationality, and all the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historical development models. It also lies behind Talcott Parsons’s pattern variables and the post–World War II modernization theory.

But modernity was always tied to colonialism. And the progressive vision of modernity occludes this fact. For Du Bois, what stood at the center of his time was the color line that produced a global racial division. The defining characteristics of modernity for Du Bois were colonialism and the creation of race, the invention of whiteness, and the global denial of humanity and multiple forms of exclusion, oppression, exploitation, and dispossession constructed along racial lines. Hence we describe his sociology as a critique of racialized modernity. Du Bois reflects in his autobiography,

Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the established social order and of the economic development into which I was born. But just that part of this order which seemed to most of my fellows nearest perfection, seemed to me the most inequitable
and wrong; and starting from that critique, I gradually, as the years went by, found other things to question in my environment.  

Modernity, for Du Bois, is racialized. And his sociology sought to analyze, criticize, and ultimately undo this historical construct. But as Du Bois notes, his understanding of the modern world changed with time and with the events of his own struggle against racism. At the beginning of his scholarly and activist career, Du Bois accepted the notions of progress that sustained the existing social order but questioned the position of people of color within it. Over the years, he became a critic of racial and colonial capitalism as a whole. As he puts it in his posthumously published autobiography, “At first, however, my criticism was confined to the relation of my people to the world movement. I was not questioning the world movement in itself. What the white world was doing, its goals and ideals, I had not doubted were quite right. What was wrong was that I and people like me and thousands of others who might have my ability and aspiration, were refused permission to be a part of this world.”

From the beginning Du Bois saw the color line as global and tied to the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade. But at the beginning of his career as a scholar and an activist, he believed in the possibility of persuading American and European white elites of the error of their ways. Du Bois believed that presenting scientific data demonstrating that racial barriers explained the stunted progress of the Black masses would persuade the white elites to remove racial barriers. Then it was up to the Talented Tenth, the elite of the Black population, to uplift the masses. This was his Talented Tenth theory. It was an elitist theory in that it accepted the cultural backwardness of the Black masses and put the elites in the role—and the duty—of uplifting their people. The early Du Bois was an elitist, and for this he has been justifiably criticized.

At the same time, from the very beginning Du Bois asserted that Black people had the capacity for agency. He also insisted that the gaps between whites and Blacks could be closed, something that was strongly denied by the racism prevalent among sociologists at the time, either in its popular biological version or in the culturalist version that was more accepted among social scientists. Finally, it is important to point out that Du Bois’s Talented Tenth was not a big-money philanthropic elite
but instead an educated elite of teachers, professors, religious leaders, and small-business owners, a petite bourgeoisie of sorts. Ultimately, the Talented Tenth theory was Du Bois’s early attempt at figuring out how to deracialize modernity.

Over time Du Bois realized that he could not persuade the white elites through the presentation of scientific data and rational arguments, as he came to realize that racism and colonialism were pillars of capitalism, an understanding he developed through his original incorporation of the work of Karl Marx. He understood capitalism as a historical system based on the global production of commodities for markets through the exploitation of labor. But unlike Marx, who began his theorization of capitalism from the perspective of the European factory worker, Du Bois looked at capitalism from the perspective of racialized and colonized workers. Whereas Marx tried to show that exploitation worked through the exchange of equivalent amounts of labor without coercion, for Du Bois, coercion and oppression were permanent features of the experience of racialized and colonial labor and of racialized modernity.

**Racialized Subjectivity and Agency**

Racialized modernity generated for Du Bois a particular kind of subjectivity. By “subjectivity” we mean the forms and patterns of understanding, thinking, and feeling about the self, other people, and the world we live in. Du Bois’s phenomenology analyzed the construction of the self and of racialized subjects’ modes of understanding. His best-known articulation of the phenomenology of racialized subjectivity is the theory of double consciousness. Mainstream theories affirm that the self and subjectivity are built through social interaction, communication, and mutual recognition. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness analyzes how the veil—Du Bois’s metaphor to describe the work of the color line in the process of self-formation—interrupts interactions, communication, and recognition among people who inhabit social spaces organized around the color line, a fact that early theorists of the self, such as William James, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Horton Cooley, failed to see.

Racialized subjectivities and selves are formed in specific oppressive social locations. But Du Bois insisted on the possibilities of agency for
both the racialized and the colonized. In “Sociology Hesitant,” an unpublished essay written in late 1904 or early 1905, Du Bois argues that sociology’s goal is to determine the scope of law and chance in human action. For Du Bois, chance refers to the ability of people to make undetermined choices and affect the reality in which they live. Du Bois set his argument for chance against the prevalent approaches of his time, such as Comte’s, which postulated sociology as the study of an abstractly conceived society, or Spencer’s, which took a deterministic position in the study of human action.

Du Bois borrowed the language of chance from William James. James argued for the recognition of the role of chance, which for him meant the presence of meaningful alternative courses of action, and against the idea that human actions were fully determined. James did not negate causation or constraints; he acknowledged that actions were taken in contexts—contexts formed by external constraints and by the individual’s views—and he argued that once actions were taken they became definite and part of a new constraining context. But James argued that at any particular point, alternatives existed and therefore moral action was meaningful. For the pragmatists, the self was socially constructed but retained the possibility of making choices and generating social alternatives.

While Du Bois’s contention that people can affect the reality in which they live was articulated in the language of pragmatism, that belief emerged from his own experience fighting the color line and asserting the humanity of racialized people. Du Bois’s take on human agency was rooted in the Black Radical Tradition. Furthermore, he saw human action as taking place in the context of a world structured around colonialism and the color line, something the pragmatists were oblivious to.

Du Bois referred to the constraints to action as the realm of law. Law refers to the historically created institutions that regulate social practices and limit the ability of individuals to make choices. Du Bois refers to two types of law-like regularities, which he refers to as two rhythms—one that he likens to physical law, external to human action, and another that emerges as the result of planned human activity and can change as a result of such activity. In “Sociology Hesitant,” he gives as an example the functioning of a women’s club, and he also mentions human customs, laws, patterns of trade, and the organization of government. That is, the limits to human action are the result of the institutionalization
of repeated contingent human action. The color line was the product of historical contingencies and agencies.

For Du Bois, the multiple forms of individual and collective action of the racialized could challenge the color line and the conditions of the lives of racialized and colonized people. All through his life Du Bois rooted the struggle for recognition of the humanity of racialized and colonized people and for a more humane society in the cultural resilience and creativity of people of color. He did so early in his life in the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he links the assertion of Black humanity to the sorrow songs, and late in his life in his 1957 response to Kwame Nkrumah's invitation to attend the ceremony marking Ghana's independence, in which he argues that the new independent African countries should build political and social orders based on African communitarian traditions rather than on Western modernity.

**The Color Line**

The color line—the division of people according to racial classifications—stands, then, at the center of Du Bois's understanding of modernity and subjectivity. But his understanding of the color line changed over the course of his life and career. Du Bois was the first sociologist to propose a social constructionist approach to the analysis of race. This approach is rooted in the analysis of historical processes of labor exploitation, cultural classifications, and social exclusions. Race is both a category of oppression and exclusion and a form of group identification. Du Bois struggled all his life to dismantle the first but also to define and build the second. As Nahum Chandler points out, the question of group constitution and construction was one of Du Bois's central concerns. And an important concern of Du Bois's theoretical work was to consider the materials with which African Americans and the Africana diaspora are to construct their identity.

Du Bois's first attempt to theorize race is elaborated in “The Conservation of Races,” his presentation to the American Negro Academy in 1897, in which he argues that world history is the history of groups, not individuals, and not of any group but of racial groups. He asks, What is a race? and then responds, “It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions
and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.”

In this definition, Du Bois alludes to common blood, a reference to biological lineages and ancestry. But he refers also to language, common history, and traditions, and gives history and traditions a greater weight than common blood. The former is always the basis of racial formation, while the latter is only generally so. These two themes continue to be present in his discussion. Later in the text he asserts, “What is the real distinction between these nations? Is it the physical differences of blood, color and cranial measurements? Certainly, we must all acknowledge that physical differences play a great part, and that, with wide exceptions and qualifications, these eight great races of today follow the cleavage of physical race distinctions.”

These references to blood and physical differences have created some debate concerning whether at this point he had broken with the dominant biological understanding of race. While Du Bois makes concessions to the biological common sense of his time, it is clear that he thinks that the more relevant and important differences are the product of social history.

He asserts, “But while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them.”

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that in “Conservation,” Du Bois equates race to a Herderian notion of peoplehood: a group of common history and of common destiny. Du Bois emphasizes the common striving of racial groups and their contributions to human history as groups.

Shortly after the presentation and publication of “Conservation,” Du Bois published “The Study of Negro Problems,” a key text for understanding his sociological thinking. In this essay, Du Bois argues that empirical community studies should include four elements: historical analysis, statistical description, sociological interpretation, and the anthropological measurement of bodies. As in “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois is preoccupied with the dominant biological language of race of his time. But rather than accept this language, his goal is to undermine it by using the same methods as “scientific” racism. This Du Bois does in the Atlanta study of 1906, which directly confronts the question of mea-
surement of physical differences and concludes that there are no physical differences between people ascribed to different races.\textsuperscript{33}

As time passed, this concern with demonstrating the absence of physical differences faded. Already in \textit{The Negro}, published in 1915, Du Bois asserts that there are no physical differences between the races, that there is no one homogenous Black or white race, and that there are many physical differences within each race. This is a formulation that he would return to repeatedly in his writings, always emphasizing that differences between social groups are the product of sociohistorical processes, not biological or essential cultural differences.

Du Bois argues that race, in the sense of groups separated by the color line, was the result of historical processes of social exclusion. His understanding of these processes also changed over time. When he wrote \textit{The Philadelphia Negro}, Du Bois believed that racism was the product of ignorance and that science could enlighten white elites to undo racial barriers. In \textit{John Brown}, published in 1909, he argues that prejudice is the result of the rise of a wrong interpretation of Darwin’s theories.\textsuperscript{34} In \textit{The Negro}, published in 1915, he attributes the pervasiveness of prejudice to the slave trade, the historical process of transforming human beings into chattel. But in \textit{Black Reconstruction} and \textit{The World and Africa}, texts written in the 1930s and 1940s, after Du Bois’s engagement with Marx’s theories, discourses of racism and racial inequalities are described as resulting from the need to justify a global system of exploitation and dispossession of people of color, based on colonialism.

In \textit{Dusk of Dawn}, we encounter his mature understanding of race. He reiterates that internal diversity within groups and the mixing of populations render any scientific definition of race invalid. He asserts, “Thus it is easy to see that scientific definition of race is impossible; it is easy to prove that physical characteristics are not so inherited as to make it possible to divide the world into races . . . [A]ll this has nothing to do with the plain fact that throughout the world today organized groups of men by monopoly of economic and physical power, legal enactment and intellectual training are limiting with determination and unflagging zeal the development of other groups.”\textsuperscript{35} Addressing the question of how then one could know who is Black, he answers, “I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the Black man is a person who must ride ’Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”\textsuperscript{36} Furthering his conceptualization of
race, he elaborates, “Perhaps it is wrong to speak of it at all as ‘a concept’ rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies.”

For the mature Du Bois, race is a product of institutionalized power. Racialization and racism were the product of a system of global colonial exploitation, but they also became constitutive and structuring elements of modernity, not just its by-product.

As Du Bois moved away from his early ideas of common fate and group striving, he began to identify common history and self-making action as the bases for group formation. Despite the violent history of the Africana diaspora, despite slavery and exploitation, Du Bois always emphasized the capacity for resistance and agency. He went to great lengths to describe the ways Black people have built their own lives and institutions behind the color line. From his earliest works, Du Bois was concerned with showing the liveliness of Black communities and organizations despite the hostile and dire conditions in which they lived. This goal informs his work in *The Philadelphia Negro* and the Atlanta Studies, and is also clearly present in *The Negro*, in which Du Bois details the ways Black enslaved people opposed slavery and the progress the freed people made through their own actions during Reconstruction, a topic to which he returns in detail in *Black Reconstruction*.

Du Bois developed a social constructionist understanding of race informed by historical processes that institutionalized racial differences and privileged the power and action of the dominant white group. He regarded these historical processes as global and inherent to historical capitalism, but not definitive: group formation among the racialized, including organizing communities and creating shared cultural meanings, was a way of resisting oppression and potentially building emancipatory collective action.

Du Bois was also the first sociologist to develop the study of whiteness as lived experience. In his writings, he recognizes that the veil affects not only the racialized but also the racially dominant group. If the lived experience of the racialized is characterized by double consciousness, the lived experience of the racializing is characterized by ignorance and bad faith. Du Bois shows that racial discourses and understandings became part of the natural attitude of whites. His analysis of white subjectivity reveals how it constructs social inequality and furthers racial and colonial capitalism.
Undoing the Color Line

As a scholar, an activist, and an activist scholar, Du Bois was committed to eliminating the color line, and dedicated much of his life’s efforts to that goal. His activism, though, was informed by his evolving sociological understanding of the color line and racialized modernity. The young Du Bois believed that as a result of centuries of slavery, Black people were not ready to function efficiently in society—and by “efficiency” he meant the ability of people and groups to adapt to the social order and thrive within it. Much like the early white sociological thinkers, Du Bois believed that there was a cultural gap between the Black masses and the white mainstream. Yet unlike the white mainstream thinkers of his time, Du Bois believed that it was possible to close that gap. Furthermore, he believed that the uplifting of the Black masses was the task of Black people themselves, specifically the Black elites, the Talented Tenth.

The early Du Bois believed that with the right leadership and access to education, the Black population would be able to become an efficient social group. In *The Philadelphia Negro* Du Bois analyzes the internal class structure of the Black community and describes an elite composed of educators, clergy, small merchants, and some professionals. This relatively small group of educated, middle-class individuals, the Talented Tenth, plays an outsized role in Du Bois’s initial thinking. Du Bois’s early writings combined an early statement of modernization theory (uplifting through the action of the Talented Tenth) with an early statement of incorporation theory (the Black masses adapting to the expectations of the white mainstream and working efficiently within it).

The young Du Bois, in writing *The Philadelphia Negro* and conducting the Atlanta Studies, believed in the possibility of persuading white elites to abandon racism. He viewed their racism as a product of faulty knowledge and information: If they would understand the predicament of African Americans, they would let the Talented Tenth do the work of uplifting the group. His early writings often mention the importance of the encounter between the Black and white elites. If the white elites were acquainted with the Black elites, he believed, they would realize that by ending the barriers to progress, Black people would become just as efficient as whites. Yet, in *Dusk of Dawn* he asserts that this approach
was fruitless. He realized that there was no audience for his scientific findings, that no matter how much evidence he could provide, whites would not change their minds.

As Du Bois explains in “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” his understanding of the process of change evolved. During his time in Atlanta he realized the importance of political activism to achieve civil and political rights. His description of the masses also changed. Already in his biography of John Brown he emphasizes how the Black masses have changed themselves. In this stage of his political and sociological evolution, he puts a stronger emphasis on the actions of organizations and the masses. Thus, in *The Negro* he asserts that since Emancipation, despite dire expectations and predictions from the white community, the Black masses amassed wealth and education through hard work and self-organization in churches and mutual aid societies. Anticipating his analysis in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois praises the work of the Black political leaders in the Reconstruction period in promoting widespread educational and economic opportunities.

In the 1930s Du Bois's views on how to address the pervasiveness of racism evolved yet again. He had become increasingly pessimistic about the possibilities of overcoming the depth of racism in the short term. In 1934, Du Bois abandoned his work at the NAACP over political differences regarding its integrationist policy, which he believed was not working. Du Bois's new approach to understanding and fighting racism comes through in his writings. In *Black Reconstruction*, he coins the term the “psychological wage” of whiteness, what we may today call “white privilege”—that is, the benefits that being white confers in everyday life and in the construction of self-esteem, and that make whites invest in protecting racial inequality. In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois notes the resilience of whites’ irrational beliefs and habitus of domination. At this point Du Bois also emphasizes the role of the masses in their own emancipation. This comes across clearly in *Black Reconstruction*, in which he shows how runaway enslaved people won the Civil War and forced the North to emancipate them; in *Dusk of Dawn*, he advocates for the development of a Black-owned cooperative economy to withstand racism. He still believed that the educated elites had a role to play in Black emancipation, but it was an accompanying role, not the leading role that he imagined in “The Talented Tenth.”
Du Bois always understood the color line as global, but in his early Pan-African work, he stated his belief that Black Americans would lead their African brethren into the modern world, much as the Talented Tenth would lead the African American masses. In his late years, however, Du Bois came to believe that it was the African anticolonial movement that would lead the Africana diaspora. He came to understand the color line as intrinsic to colonial and racial capitalism, and he thought that decolonization, African-centered development, and socialism were the way to erase it.

This Book

We have written this book so that young sociologists will not have to go through the same experiences of belatedly discovering Du Bois as we did. We write it so that sociologists who did not study his work in graduate school will have a tool with which to start becoming familiar with it. And we write it so that the discipline of sociology will not be able to continue to deny or ignore the full scope of Du Bois’s work or his relevance as a social theorist. In this book we build upon the work of the legion of Du Boisian scholars who have worked to redress this erasure. Our contribution to this long tradition of scholarship on Du Bois is to define his sociological program and explore what a Du Boisian sociology could be in the twenty-first century. However, three elements of tension run through this book.

First is the tension throughout the text between Du Bois’s voice and our own. This tension exists because we were intentionally generous with the use of extended quotations. By doing this, we sought to have Du Bois’s eloquent and powerful voice come through in the text to convey a point, bolster an argument, or locate his thinking at a particular moment in history. Du Bois’s voice has for so long been suppressed and his work understudied that we thought it important to make sure that his voice can be heard clearly in this work. To do so, we drew from sources that are less often cited, with the intent of leaving a trail of references for a reader to follow up on.

There is also a tension regarding the use of biography. We struggled to strike the right balance between theoretical analysis and information about Du Bois’s own life. Several works deal with his biography, notably
the two volumes by historian David Levering Lewis, who won Pulitzer Prizes for both works. Many other books explore specific aspects of Du Bois's life and help illuminate how his life and his thought were intertwined because of his position on the color line. While not wanting to duplicate these efforts, we realized that ignoring his life story would impoverish the text by failing to consider the context through which his sociology emerged—that as a Black person he moved in the upper echelon of the white world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, we chose to bring his life into our analysis by way of biographical montage. We draw from key moments in his life to set the scene for where he was both spatially and intellectually at the time.⁴⁴

Finally, we struggled with the tension among articulating the contours, complexities, and contributions of W. E. B. Du Bois the man, Du Bois's sociology, and a contemporary Du Boisian sociology. Although we are admirers of Du Bois, we did not want to present him as infallible. Although Du Bois achieved many extraordinary things during his lifetime, he was not a man without faults. Further, Du Bois's personal life, while interesting, was not our primary concern. Our goal was to focus on Du Bois's sociology—that is, the sociological works carried out by Du Bois himself. Defining Du Bois's sociology is a main goal of this book. But we have another goal. We want to explore, along with you, the reader, the potentiality of Du Bois's sociology in this contemporary moment.

We believe that acknowledging the full extent of Du Bois's theoretical and empirical contributions can help us rethink the discipline as it currently exists. Our goal is to provide the building blocks for the construction of a contemporary Du Boisian sociology, reflecting on what it would mean for sociology at the beginning of the twenty-first century to take that seldom-traveled path of learning from Du Bois's sociology. Developing a contemporary Du Boisian sociology, however, is not a task for an isolated scholar or even two scholars working together. This book aims to generate a lively conversation as to what exactly is Du Boisian sociology and why it is of critical importance that we understand its roots and significance, a conversation in which we hope many people will participate. Our hope is that the reader will come to realize the potential of a Du Boisian sociology, something that we of this generation must make and remake, based on our life and times.