

The Rise of Scientific Sociology in America

American sociology began in the last decade of the nineteenth century, less than a generation after the emancipation of American slaves. The fate of emancipated blacks, who desired rights and privileges accorded free citizens of a democracy, was a divisive issue. The majority of whites, both North and South, were squeamish about granting citizenship to blacks, whom they viewed as an inferior race. Beyond ideology lay naked economic and political interests because southern white elites needed cheap labor akin to that provided by slaves if they were to remain a ruling aristocracy. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, white northern capitalists also required cheap labor to fuel the massive industrialization rapidly developing within the factory system embedded in American cities. Northern elites addressed their vast needs for cheap labor by hiring European immigrants. Yet African Americans fleeing southern economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and social degradation were also utilized in the North to augment the labor force and to serve as a divisive wedge preventing the development of a working class united across racial lines.¹

Class conflict between recent immigrants and capitalists generated protest, strikes, and violence. However, when blacks were added to the equation, social relations between all parties became explosive.² In the North, racial tensions were exacerbated when blacks were used as strikebreakers and when the two races competed for limited housing and desirable spaces in urban areas.³ In the South, white elites struggled

with challenges stemming from exploiting both former slaves and the white working class.⁴ The question concerning the fate of blacks lurched toward an answer at the dawn of the twentieth century. With their outlook shaped by two and half centuries of slavery, the white populace, along with white scholars such as Frederick Hoffman, viewed blacks as an inferior, criminally diseased race, unfit for intimate association.⁵ Indeed, leading white scholars argued that blacks were so mentally and physically afflicted they would soon become extinct.⁶ Black scholars such as Du Bois and Kelly Miller, who were appalled by these claims and the flawed evidence on which they rested, felt compelled to dispute the thesis by presenting evidence to the contrary.⁷ Even newly arrived poor immigrants quickly internalized the view of black inferiority and embraced whiteness because it conferred racial privileges.⁸ For most whites, the place for blacks was at the bottom of the social order.

The formal Jim Crow regime was hammered into place throughout the South during the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁹ Its purpose was to relegate blacks to the bottom of southern society, rendering them vulnerable to maximum exploitation. Jim Crow laws spread rapidly through the South, leaving in their wake racial segregation, lynching, white terrorist organizations, widespread black economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement.¹⁰ In the North, *de facto* racial segregation and widespread economic exploitation and political oppression differed only in degree from the southern Jim Crow regime.¹¹ Tensions between blacks and white immigrants were acute, giving rise to hostile confrontations and race riots, especially over economic competition, housing, and racial segregation. The combination of social conditions that came to be known as the “Negro Problem” encapsulated the struggles between whites and former slaves, who, as free persons, competed for jobs and demanded social equality. Because of stiff white resistance to black aspirations, Du Bois, at the beginning of the twentieth century, concluded that the major unasked question of whites regarding blacks was: How does it feel to be a problem?¹² Du Bois answered that “being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe.”¹³ Because American sociology rose during the period of rapid industrialization accompanied by race and ethnic conflicts, it had little choice but to address these realities theoretically and empirically if it was to be relevant as a newcomer to the social sciences.¹⁴ Indeed, during this period, huge numbers of immigrants from diverse European countries flooded American cities.¹⁵ By the second decade of the twentieth century, tens of

millions of immigrants with a variety of cultural heritages and languages had settled into distinct American neighborhoods. Because of limited space, resources, and housing, as well as growing ethnic hostilities and limited cultural familiarity with the host society, immigrants faced daunting conditions. The central question they confronted was whether they could be successfully assimilated into American society.

Thus America faced serious challenges regarding social relations between immigrants, blacks, and native-born whites during the period of rapid industrialization. Should it attempt to assimilate the immigrants, and if so, what should happen regarding their native cultures, languages, politics, religions, and ethnic associations?¹⁶ How could the various class and ethnic differences be reconciled with the needs of capital? Like race issues, these combustible immigrant issues swirled in America as the new science of sociology struggled to gain a foothold in academia. At its birth, American sociology was faced with providing explanations for racial issues as well as for challenges associated with massive immigration from various European countries.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AND THE NEGRO SOLUTION

The saga of the highly significant role played by the great conservative black leader Booker T. Washington in the emergence of American sociology is unfamiliar to most social scientists. Given Washington's significance, it is crucial to provide a brief history of his leadership. In 1903, Du Bois predicted that the twentieth century's major problem would be the color line.¹⁷ Du Bois, who had written his dissertation on the slave trade and published an important book based on it, was well aware that race had been a major global issue for centuries.¹⁸ He was also aware of the "scramble for Africa" that had consolidated European colonization of Africa during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Yet for Du Bois this global system of racial inequality that stretched throughout Africa, the Americas, and Asia would reach its zenith in the twentieth century, triggering far-flung economic, political, and racial consequences. Booker T. Washington was to become a major player in this global struggle, especially within the American context.

Racial domination was a volatile enterprise whose management and future were uncertain. As a result, in the early twentieth century dominant white regimes searched for the paths of least resistance to their rule. By 1895, the racially egalitarian practices of the Reconstruction period were being replaced by the oppressive Jim Crow regime. This

brutal neo-slavery regime stripped blacks of political and social rights and segregated them at the bottom of society. Lynchings and other white terror attacks were effective tools used to achieve black subordination, ensuring that the recently freed slaves remained an available and docile workforce.²⁰ Meanwhile, in the North, racial discrimination, enforced by legal measures, customs, and violence, was becoming a fact of daily life.²¹

Cooperation by blacks in their own oppression was a key factor in their subordination. This cooperation was not guaranteed, given the protest tradition developed during slave revolts, the abolitionist movement, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction period. Indeed, Frederick Douglass, the militant black leader of the abolitionist movement, who died in 1895, had represented bold, ceaseless protest as the route to black freedom. The ability of southern whites to subordinate blacks without serious resistance rested significantly on the type of black leadership that would replace Douglass. Just seven months after Douglass's death, white Americans, and European powers involved in colonizing Africa received a wonderful gift of black leadership—Booker T. Washington. In September of 1895, Washington delivered an epochal speech that came to be known as the Atlanta compromise. As soon as it was uttered, whites knew they had found a black leader who did not threaten their basic interests. Indeed, rabid southern segregationists, as well as northern white elites, engaged in immediate and unprecedented praise of the new black Moses.

Born a slave on a plantation in Virginia around 1856, Washington upon his emancipation began toiling in salt furnaces and coal mines at the age of nine.²² After completing elementary school, he attended the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, where he paid his expenses by working as the school's janitor. Hampton's guiding philosophy, and its specialized curriculum, promoted industrial education as the solution for the oppressed black race. Such education was designed to teach students to perform manual labor, which was proclaimed to be the foundation on which blacks could establish economic independence. The industrial curriculum taught that blacks were best fitted for manual labor, which required patience and discipline. Because this philosophy embraced industrial education, blacks were counseled to avoid politics and eschew notions of social equality. By the time Washington graduated from Hampton in 1875, he had thoroughly internalized the school's doctrine stressing industrial education, manual labor, and subservience as the salvation for recently emancipated blacks.

In 1881, Washington became the principal of Tuskegee Normal Institute for Industrial Education in Tuskegee, Alabama. In this setting, he quickly emerged as the most prominent black educator, spreading the doctrine throughout the nation that industrial education, rather than politics and agitation, was the route to black success and white acceptance. Tuskegee served as the operating base where Washington, his faculty, and his staff trained scores of students in industrial education and the etiquette required of civilized people. As a result, Tuskegee became the model for other schools that spread across the South preaching racial uplift through character building and industrial education. However, Washington was not destined to remain a mere educator because his racial message was sweet music to the ears of southern elites and northern capitalists seeking to nurture a docile black labor force and maintain deeply unequal race relations that would nevertheless be harmonious.²³ Washington's philosophy and its implementation did not threaten the emerging Jim Crow regime requiring racial segregation and black subordination.

Washington's opportunity to spread his message more broadly came during the 1895 Atlanta World Exposition, where he delivered a gripping speech. Standing before an audience of white elites and recently emancipated blacks, he thundered out positions addressing economics, politics, and social relations. Economically, he declared, blacks were best fitted for manual jobs like carpentry, cooking, brick masonry, housekeeping, and blacksmithing. Implicitly referring to blacks' political equality during Reconstruction as a mistake, he argued that because blacks were "ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden."²⁴ Washington embraced racial inequality, declaring, "It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top."²⁵

At the time of the speech, Jim Crow laws were sweeping the South. Washington embraced their political consequences, counseling that "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."²⁶ Concerned that whites would fear black anger and rebellion nourished by oppression, Washington assured them that blacks would remain loyal and politically passive. Soothing the concerns of white elites, Washington attempted to touch their hearts, informing them: "You and your fami-

lies will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours.”²⁷

Washington made clear that balmy day, as he would the rest of his career, that blacks should pursue manual labor and industrial development rather than concentrating on liberal arts. He urged blacks to learn to glorify and dignify manual labor because “no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.”²⁸ Because of these calculated pronouncements, the Atlanta speech catapulted Washington into leadership status over black America and made him useful to European colonizers, who elevated him as a model to be imitated by colonized people globally.

Washington did not hesitate to solidify his leadership. His overall racial philosophy meshed with that era of white supremacy, for it was rooted in a social Darwinism that divided the world into a racial hierarchy with civilized white people at the top and uncivilized people of color at the bottom.²⁹ In this scheme, Western whites represented the most advanced civilization the world over, while Africans represented the world’s crudest, most uncivilized savages.³⁰ Consistent with this theory, Washington viewed recently emancipated slaves as existing in a state of semibarbarism. He argued that slavery had been a civilizing force for American blacks because, “notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portions of the globe.”³¹ For Washington, “The black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did.”³² Because Washington viewed American whites as the most advanced civilization in the world, it followed that blacks needed to prove their worth to earn white respect.³³ Such recognition could be gained only through manual labor, which built character and the industrial skills that could make blacks economically independent. Washington steadfastly preached that black racial development could not be hurried by force or protest; it would emerge gradually over centuries by the efforts of patient, disciplined, blacks bearing no ill will or desire for revenge.

Washington believed that blacks, who had only recently shaken off the chains of slavery, had to engage in an all-out effort of character building if they were to become fully civilized.³⁴ Blacks, in his view, had to learn to use basic hygiene techniques, eat properly, speak and dress correctly, and avoid suspicious immoral activities, including crime, drinking, and carrying weapons.³⁵ Blacks should conduct themselves in a manner connoting dignity and self-respect. At his Tuskegee Institute, Washington constructed a social environment designed to create a modern civilized black race with a solid economic base that would garner white respect and acceptance. In Weberian terms, Washington believed that blacks needed to develop an inward asceticism that would inculcate the discipline and cultural practices necessary for a people to become successful in a capitalist world.³⁶ In 1904 Max Weber wrote Washington that “I was, some weeks ago, at Tuskegee, and my wife and myself were so deeply impressed by all we saw and learned there,” concluding, “It was—I am sorry to say this—*only* at Tuskegee I found *enthusiasm* in the South at all.”³⁷ According to the Weberian scholar Lawrence Scaff, Tuskegee represented for Weber an “effort aiming at the reconstitution of the moral order and the human personality.”³⁸ Washington was as adamant about this cultural work as he was about developing black economic independence because he thought a main reason for blacks’ inequality was their lack of civilization. As will be demonstrated later, this view constituted the Washingtonian argument “explaining” black inequality that would later be embraced by the Chicago school of sociology in the 1920s.³⁹ Washington’s leadership was backed by a powerful organization that Du Bois and Monroe Trotter referred to as the “Tuskegee Machine.”⁴⁰ The “machine” flourished because it was bankrolled by some of America’s most powerful and wealthiest whites. Because Washington understood the power of the press, he cultivated newspaper reporters and book editors so that they would use their pages to spread the Tuskegee message far and wide.⁴¹ It was critical, therefore, that Washington maintain top-level experts who specialized in media and publishing. Washington’s media reach was so extensive, especially in the black press, that Elliott Rudwick referred to the black press as Tuskegeean-dominated.⁴² The Tuskegee Machine also thrived by silencing and co-opting black rivals, planting spies to monitor their affairs, and writing unfavorable articles on them in newspapers and other popular outlets. Most of all, Washington controlled black rivals by controlling the allocation of resources, for he became the gatekeeper determining which Negroes were funded or appointed to important positions.

Washington developed specific strategies for discrediting radical northern black intellectuals who had been highly educated in eastern universities, especially Harvard and other Ivy League institutions. Using newspapers, magazines, books, contacts with influential individuals, and the public sphere, Washington smeared them as unfortunate, misguided, impatient agitators whose heads were filled with abstract, useless book knowledge. An effective Washingtonian tactic was to smear rivals as race hustlers: "Having learned that they are able to make a living out of their troubles, they have grown into the settled habit of advertising their wrongs—partly because they want sympathy and partly because it pays. Some of these people do not want the Negro to lose his grievances, because they do not want to lose their jobs."⁴³ These northern intellectuals, Washington argued, ignored real solutions while spending their energies fighting windmills. He labeled them as arrogant outsiders who did not understand southern Negroes. Washington possessed little affection for northern cities, viewing them as dens of iniquity that destroyed good earnest country blacks. He preached that blacks should avoid migrating to northern cities and should instead remain in their native southland. For him, the black problem was a southern problem and had to be solved in the South because the future of blacks rested there.

Following the Atlanta speech, Washington became the unquestioned black leader, embraced by white elites and the black masses.⁴⁴ Social scientists and white philanthropists gravitated to Washington because his Darwinian stance implied a bright future for white privilege. This admiration of white sociologists, and some blacks as well, was on full display when Booker Washington addressed the Washington Conference of the National Sociological Society in 1903 on the topic "Race Harmony, the City Negro, Rape and Lynchings." When Washington entered the church where the conference was being held, he "was greeted with prolonged clapping of hands." The group chairperson, Kelly Miller, who was chair of Howard University's sociology department, announced, "I noticed that the great Tuskegeeian, Prof. Booker T. Washington, has entered the house, and I move you that unanimous consent be granted him to speak on any subject agreeable to him."⁴⁵ The esteemed guest proceeded by espousing his doctrine of racial accommodation and asked that sociologists follow his lead. He reminded them that the majority of Negroes lived in the rural South and that the race problem needed to be solved there even though this meeting focused on city Negroes. He insisted that while agitation and protest had their place, members of this

learned society should focus on constructive solutions. He ended by declaring, “We have got to do our duty. In a great many cases you have got to wait patiently for results. If we keep on doing our duty, whether we see immediate results or not, the results will take care of themselves.”⁴⁶ From the floor, a sociologist wondered whether Washington’s method was effective but still concluded, “I believe what you say, that we must construct; we must do, if we can convince the people who are opposed to us that we can do.”

Booker T. Washington’s leadership had a profound impact on social scientists in the early twentieth century. This was so because his racial doctrines aligned with their scientific racism, which claimed that blacks were at the bottom of the social order because of biological and cultural inferiority. Even though Washington did not earn a college degree and was not a trained social scientist, he was often utilized by white social scientists to legitimize their findings on race. As the historian Francille Wilson points out, “At the meetings of white professional organizations, Booker T. Washington or a close associate might be asked to join a panel when Du Bois or one of his allies was making a presentation. Washington was frequently quoted by northern white academics . . . who felt obliged to deliver a scientific critique of the modernists’ environmental thesis.”⁴⁷ Indeed, while Washington’s influence in politics is well known, his impact on social scientific thought is a neglected subject. In this book Washington’s impact on sociological scholarship will be closely scrutinized.

Yet Washington’s wide-ranging popularity and influence in political and academic circles would not go unchallenged. An intellectually gifted black social scientist and radical activist from the North would challenge the foundations of Washington’s leadership and the philosophy on which it was based. I turn to the rise of W. E. B. Du Bois and his pioneering sociology.