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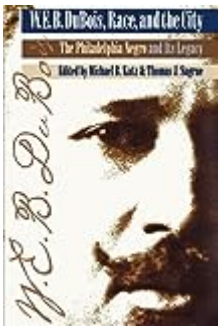

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Reviewed by Paul Jefferson (Department of History, Haverford College)

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The Philadelphia Negro a Century Later: Revisiting an Ur-Text

W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and the City, a collection of essays, grew out of a May 1995 seminar at the University of Pennsylvania celebrating the centenary of the research project that became DuBois's *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899). The seminar was convened to situate that work in its late nineteenth-century intellectual and social contexts, and to consider its enduring resonance for the new African American urban history of the late twentieth-century[1]; or–in the editors' alternative phrasing–"to reflect on the book's meaning for interpreting the intersections of race and the city today" (p. vii).

The editors' discussion of "The Context of *The Philadelphia Negro*" introduces nine essays grouped in three parts. The introduction is splendidly done. Aptly subtitled "the city, the settlement house movement, and the rise of the social sciences," it unpacks the circumstances in which *The Philadelphia Negro* was produced. It makes a case for the hybrid genealogy and equivocal assumptions of that text in as comprehensive yet focused and trustworthy a fashion as any succinct treatment could hope to do.

Part I, "DuBois and the Color Line," will be of interest primarily to intellectual historians. Its three essays discuss the cultural assumptions that both enabled and constrained the DuBois project; in so doing they suggest how his concerns as a scholar-activist might best be understood.

The opening essay, Mia Bey's " 'The World Was Thinking Wrong About Race': *The Philadelphia Negro* and Nineteenth-Century Science," suggests that the DuBois text should be read "less as a project of any of the still-forming social science disciplines than as an iconoclastic study of what was known in the 1890s as 'the Negro problem' " (p. 42). This ostensibly plausible assertion need not have led the author astray. However, uncritically deferential to those she takes as authorities–here in framing her approach to *The Philadelphia Negro*,[2] elsewhere, in reading his other work[3]–she is less persuasive than she might have been.

The costs of her disinclination, in the former instance, to consider DuBois in relation to the epistemological/methodological discussions of his time must go undiscussed. But the ironic result, in the latter instance, is that she thinks wrongly about DuBois's own thinking

about race. A jarring example: her assertion that " 'The Conservation of Races' is now mostly remembered for its *unvarnished racial essentialism*" (p. 47: my emphasis).

The second essay, "W.E.B. DuBois's Archaeology of Race: Rereading 'The Conservation of Races,' " offers a welcome corrective. Seeking to account for the "staying power" of DuBois's thinking, Thomas Holt challenges readings of his work "that emphasize his inconsistencies, his incoherences, his virtual entrapment by Victorian ideas of race and historical process" (p. 62). In suggesting that DuBois was concerned with "the [multidimensional] *problematic* of race relations in the modern world" (p. 61), Holt is able to account for both change and continuity in DuBois's thinking over the length of his career.

To my knowledge, Holt is the first scholar [myself excepted[4]], to identify two 1897 DuBois texts–"The Study of the Negro Problems," delivered before the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and "The Conservation of Races," delivered before the American Negro Academy–as complementary foundational statements, unmistakably intended as such by DuBois himself at the time (p. 63). Having established the importance of "The Conservation of Races" as an intellectual template, the author goes on to challenge an influential misreading of DuBois's intentions in that text. Contra Anthony Appiah, far from being an "uncompleted argument,"[5] Holt insists, DuBois's continuing interrogation of the race concept, dating from this address, yielded a "postmodern" reading of race as "a social, political, and historical construction of the modern era, linked to the expansion of European capital" (p. 73).

The third essay in Part I, "Giant Steps: W.E.B. DuBois and the Historical Enterprise," is also extremely well done. Arguing that "DuBois's historical writings can be broken into three groups–the social scientific, the cultural materialist, and the Marxist–each marking a phase in DuBois's development" (p. 79), Robert Gregg charts an intellectual migration that proceeded from *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896) and *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) to *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935) and *Black Folk, Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (1939). Given its explicitly historiographical thrust, one might consider this essay a thematic orphan in the collection, were it not for the ingenuity with which Gregg exploits *The Philadelphia Negro* as both case in point and point of departure for his argument.[6] "In [DuBois's] intellectual journey from positivism to anticolonial Marxism, the significance of *The Philadelphia Negro* was profound," he argues. "Within this work could be found both the highest expression of empirical social science ... and the idealism of *The Souls of Black Folk*, [an idealism] which ultimately would lead to an assault on positivism similar in content and scope to Marx's assault on classical political economy" (pp. 94-95). Gregg is particularly good at identifying creative tensions in DuBois's texts that gave them "a dialectical or dynamic quality." From the beginning his "work was in motion," Gregg argues, "and [thus] could be readily misunderstood if stopped or taken in isolation" (p. 79). He joins Thomas Holt in resisting reductionist readings of DuBois that are historically ill-informed or [con]textually tone-deaf.

The two essays of Part II, "DuBois's Philadelphia," highlight his emphasis on what is still a central theme in the history and sociology of inner cities, the theme of the racial (and racist) segmenting of urban job markets. Both essays are useful contributions in their different ways.

In " 'Lifework' and Its Limits: The Problem of Labor in *The Philadelphia Negro*", Jacqueline Jones offers an appreciative and incisive overview of DuBois's pioneering work. The book, she argues "provides a compelling corrective to more recent studies of ghetto life, studies that almost as a matter of perverse principle downplay the long-term effects of structural unemployment and underemployment in shaping the African American past and present" (p. 104).

Tera Hunter's " 'The 'Brotherly Love' for Which This City Is Proverbial Should Extend to All': The Everyday Lives of Working-Class Women in Philadelphia and Atlanta in the 1890s" is a richly textured comparative discussion. Exploring the "cultural significance of domestic service [in the urban South] as a racial signifier" (p. 135), she maps a different, changing, but equally restrictive pattern of work opportunities in DuBois's Philadelphia. In the course of doing so, however, she critiques DuBois's blindness to gender issues and to the positive aspects of working-class culture; a blindness whose significance–having her own fish to fry–she is slow analytically to unpack.

Although DuBois "recognized the importance of ... women's labor in the context of the transformation of capitalism" (p. 128), Hunter concedes, he "condemned a broad range of everyday cultural practices that working-class women relied on to survive the racially circumscribed job market" (p. 144). More than that, "[b]lack family structure and conjugal relations were ... more fluid and complex than DuBois understood, or was will-

ing to accept" (p. 130). Some of her strictures are valid. Still, one wonders if she is flogging issues in a contemporary language whose class and gender accents DuBois could not be expected to have understood.[7]

Part III, "The Problem of the Twentieth Century," is more of an editorial grab bag. Its four essays speak to the legacy of *The Philadelphia Negro* for a post-industrial [post-modern?] urban world. Among other, more local subjects, they consider the research-methodological, conceptual-analytical, and social policy implications of the nexus of issues DuBois framed originally in his modernist idiom.

Antonio McDaniel's "The "Philadelphia Negro" Then and Now: Implications for Empirical Research" is an historically uneven essay which is palpably at odds with itself. The author's expert meditations on urban topics in need of further research are compromised by an untrustworthy grasp of the intellectual history of the late nineteenth-century, on the one hand, and by a tendentious reading of DuBois that is driven by a rhetorical Afrocentrism, on the other. One example of the first lapse is his reference to "the positivist revolts in economic history lead [sic] by Gustav von Schmoller and Adolph Wagner, DuBois's German professors" (p. 155).[8] One example of the second lapse is his assertion that "the DuBois of *The Philadelphia Negro* analyzed the structural and behavioral aspects of African American oppression from a Eurocentric perspective, arguing for an end to white racism within a cultural context where African Americans would become more "white' " (pp. 188-89).

The second essay, V. P. Franklin's "Operation Street Corner: The Wharton Center and the Juvenile Gang Problem in Philadelphia, 1945-1958," is a focused and useful discussion of its subject.

Carl Nightingale's "The Global Inner City: Toward a Historical Analysis," the third of the four essays in Part III, offers world-wide heuristic counterpoint to the more local contextualizing provided in the editors' introduction. Conceptually inclusive yet analytically penetrating, it provides an invaluable bibliography of the relevant literature. Distilled from the author's work in progress, the essay–itself worth the price of the volume–should have been exploited by the editors as a thematically synoptic, forward-looking bookend. Articulating the insights of "underclass" theorists, "world systems" theorists, and international economists, the essay opens by making a compelling case for the need to "study urban poverty, social policy, and racial segregation in international comparative context" (p. 225).

The new transnational economy has created and continually reinvents a "global racial logic," the author argues, a logic that "profoundly complicate[s] and entrenche[s] the experience of poverty in urban African American communities" (pp. 234, 235). This economy and its logic are the products of five intersecting "global movements"–originally "movements of investment capital, workplaces, and people," but increasingly "the movement of consumer goods through expanding channels of world trade, and the movement of information, values, imagery, and rhetorical expression through expanding channels of world communication" (p. 235). The essay details the impact of these five movements on "inner-city dwellers"–a postmodern trope for the politically and economically marginalized; that is to say for the world's "minorities."

Following discussions too rich to summarize, the essay concludes–perfectly in the spirit of DuBois–by presuming the linkage of theory and practice, research and reform. While brain-storming issues for further study (pp. 244-46), the author thinks out loud about politics: "If a critical analysis of the new global laissez-faire and its troubling political economy can reverse ... the political polarization between the poor on the one hand and the working and middle classes on the other," he suggests, "it will provide its ultimate test as a theory of inner-city ... and world history" (p. 246).

In the final essay of Part III, Elijah Anderson comments eloquently–if mournfully and mordantly–on the problem of "Drugs and Violence in the Inner City."

Of the nine essays making up the body of this volume, two are less than fully successful; four are very, if variously, useful; two are particularly well done; and one is magisterial.

Though displaying the unevenness and editorial arbitrariness that characterize ventures of this sort, *W.E.B. DuBois, Race, and the City* is an unusually informative and wide-ranging collection. Putting past and current perspectives on "African Americans in cities over time" into cross-disciplinary dialogue, it appropriately honors the DuBois text that has enabled such conversations.

Notes

[1]. On the new African American urban history, consult the *Journal of Urban History*, 21 (March 1995) 283-295 and *passim*; and 21 (May 1995), 435-504.

[2]. The author follows Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman, "Appropriating the Idioms of Science:

The Rejection of Scientific Racism," in Dominic LaCapra, ed., *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives of Hegemony and Resistance* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[3]. The author follows Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[4]. See Paul Jefferson, "Present at the Creation: Rethinking DuBois's 'Practice Theory' " in Rutledge M. Dennis, ed., *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, volume 9 [W.E.B. DuBois: The Scholar as Activist"] (Greenwich, Conn. and London: JAI Press, 1996).

[5]. See Appiah, *op. cit.*

[6]. For an appreciation of the historical significance of *The Philadelphia Negro* from a related point of view, see Joe W. Trotter, "African Americans in the City: The Industrial Era, 1900-1950," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (May 1995), 439: "Black urban history is deeply rooted in the discipline of sociology. Its sociological genesis is tied to the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899)."

[7]. The point is not that DuBois cannot be indicted for myopia. It is that in doing so without explanation, contemporary analysts are guilty of a form of historical anachronism. In the spirit of Foucault, Gramsci, and Barry Barnes, an "Edinburgh School" sociologist of science, intellectual historians should try to understand what thoughts can and cannot readily be thought at various times, in different cultures, under promiscuous epistemic regimes. In reconstructing the cultural logic of "other" points of view, we would also do well to recall Jane Addams's admonition in *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910) that sympathy is an essential *epistemological* resource. [my emphasis] In Addams's own words–near the close of Chapter Six, any edition: A social settlement "should demand from its residents a scientific patience in the accumulation of facts and the steady holding of their sympathies as one of the best instruments for that accumulation."

[8]. This characterization of Schmoller and Wagner as "positivists" is at best misleading, at worst inaccurate. They are properly understood as "empirical idealists." Other more trustworthy "authorities" include David Frisby, "Introduction to the English Translation," in Theodore Adorno et al., eds. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. by Glyn Adey and David Frisby, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1976), xvii-xix; Eric Roll, *A History of Economic Thought* (London: Faber, 1973), 304-311; and George Stocking, Jr., "Introduction," *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 11.

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