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CHAPTER

## W. E. B. Du Bois and Rural Sociology

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### Abstract

Among W. E. B. Du Bois's many intellectual contributions were his studies of rural Black Americans and the social milieu in which they lived one generation removed from enslavement. These studies, conducted at the end of the nineteenth century and during early years of the twentieth, were groundbreaking theoretically and methodologically, beginning with detailed rural community studies that provided the basis for broader work on race and the class distinctions that quickly emerged among Black farmers and artisans. The focus here is on Du Bois's work as a rural scholar and his connections with the emergence of rural sociology as a discipline over the first decades of the twentieth century through interactions rural sociologists had with Du Bois and other Black sociologists. Two central insights from Du Bois's work have continuing relevance to rural sociologists: the centrality of race and the importance of a moral purpose guiding scholarly pursuits.

**Keywords:** KEY WORDS, Du Bois, rural sociology, sociology, rural, race, critical race theory, Black farmers, Black communities

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Our task is to understand W. E. B. Du Bois as a rural sociologist; to examine what we missed as a discipline because for a time we forgot this fact; and to consider how our discipline might be different today if that had not been the case, and how we might incorporate his work into the discipline of rural sociology as we move forward.

Du Bois was many things besides a rural sociologist. He was a historian, a sociologist, an anthropologist, a philosopher, a novelist, a poet, a civil and human rights activist, and a Pan-African leader. We claim Du Bois as a rural sociologist because his research methods and findings were an early contribution to the scientific understanding of rural life and because his blend of scholarship and activism mirrors a throughline within the discipline.

Our discussion proceeds as follows. We first provide a brief overview of Du Bois's contributions to the understanding of rural life in America at the end of the nineteenth and during the first years of the twentieth century. We then trace the early history of rural sociology as it emerged from the broader discipline of sociology and note early interactions between rural sociologists and Du Bois. Aldon Morris (2015) persuasively argues that white leaders within mainstream sociology actively sought to suppress the seminal contributions of Du Bois. We argue that rural sociology took a different path, that there was a cadre that included intellectual leaders within the discipline who interacted with Du Bois and other Black sociologists during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Starting from the mid-1940s and into the late 1980s, Du Bois's contributions did, however, fade from the discipline's collective consciousness. We explore possible reasons for this disappearance, including the institutional setting of rural sociology within the land-grant university system, the wider sociopolitical atmosphere of the 1940s and 1950s, and internal dynamics of the discipline itself. We conclude by discussing how the insights of Du Bois as a scholar of rural America are useful to and being used by rural sociologists today.

## Du Bois as Rural Scholar

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Due to the breadth of his work, Du Bois defies easy classification. As a sociologist, it is fair to say he focused greater attention on urban than rural issues of the time (Wright 2020: 15), and yet the record is clear that he made important contributions to the sociology of rural life in the southeastern United States (the "South"). His first work on rural issues was a seminar paper, "The Plantation and Peasant Proprietorship System of Agriculture in the Southern United States," written in 1893 while studying in Germany (Rudwick 1976). In the summer of 1897, while conducting field research for *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899b) and using the same innovative research methods he had developed for the Philadelphia study, Du Bois spent several months working on his first empirical rural study in the South, "The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia," published by the Department of Labor in 1898. Du Bois conducted a study of Dougherty County, Georgia, in the summer of 1898, which was unpublished but was presented as testimony to the Industrial Commission on Education (Du Bois 1901b). In addition to the Farmville study, the Department of Labor supported and published three other works by Du Bois, including "The Negro in the Black Belt" (1899a), "The Negro Landholder of Georgia" (1901a), and "The Negro Farmer" (1906). These are full of detailed tables of descriptive data used as a foundation for understanding historical processes that created the social conditions he encountered. Central to Du Bois's legacy in rural sociology, these Bureau of Labor studies were the first federally funded research on rural life in the United States (Larson and Zimmerman 2003: 22).

Du Bois (1898) used primary data along with data from the US Census and the county government to describe demographic change in Farmville between 1790 and 1890, as well as changes in farm size, rising Black landownership, tenure relationships, types of crops produced across multiple time periods, housing conditions, literacy rates, child labor, occupations, household budgets, and more in a total of thirty-four tables. The community of Farmville itself was described as a small trading center serving the needs of the surrounding rural population living for the most part on isolated farmsteads. He noted that Farmville attracted rural youth from the countryside, particularly young men seeking employment opportunities; and that these opportunities provided skills that enabled them to venture further afield to Richmond, Norfolk, Baltimore, and New York. He linked this observation to his work in Philadelphia, observing that young adults who migrated to cities for work often left children to be raised by grandparents in Farmville, explaining the small proportion of young children in the Black population of Philadelphia.

The Farmville study laid the foundation for important theoretical contributions by Du Bois at the intersections of class, race, and inequality. Du Bois observed "the growing differentiation of classes among Negroes, even in small communities," which he considered "a natural and encouraging result of 30 years' development" (1898: 38). His observations of class differentiation represent an important contribution to

understanding class formation in the United States, particularly because at the time white sociologists and other observers considered rural Blacks to be an undifferentiated mass. Not so, argued Du Bois, who described Black families who owned farms, entrepreneurs who owned thriving businesses, and teachers and ministers who were educated leaders of their communities (Du Bois 1898). He described Farmville as a dynamic community laboring under “the social weight of a mass of ignorant freedmen” but one that was taking “the raw country lad from the farm to train in industrial life, and sending north and east more or less equipped recruits for metropolitan life” (3–4). Du Bois (1901a) recognized as important the rise of landownership among Black farmers but viewed the isolation and immiseration of many Black sharecroppers as little better than enslavement. Small towns and metropolitan centers presented educational and employment opportunities for Black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century (Du Bois 1899a). Du Bois also provided nuanced understanding of class distinctions among whites in the South, notably in his novel *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* (1911).

The topics of race and racism featured prominently in Du Bois’s writings. Some white landowners were supportive of freedmen families becoming landowners, and some merchants who advanced credit were honest, but the opposite also was true more often than not (Du Bois 1901a: 668). Du Bois noted that some progress had been made in race relations but also that institutions supporting racial discrimination (particularly in education and the law) still guided in separate directions the prospects of whites and Blacks. Writing about the rural South, Du Bois critically examined contract labor laws, vagrancy laws, and unfair manipulation of sharecropper debts, which, in sum, “make a body of law which carries force and fraud on its very face” (1912: 82). Embedded in this mistreatment was the deliberate failure to provide adequate funding for Black education. The result was a yawning gap in education, income, wealth, and both political and legal rights.

In their struggles, freedmen families were not alone. Du Bois wrote of Black schools, churches, and benevolent societies as institutional sources of community leadership. Benevolent societies collected small sums of money from members on a regular basis and used those funds to support members in times of illness or to pay for funeral expenses. These local organizations channeled collective energies and provided opportunities for developing leadership. It is the church, however, that Du Bois describes as serving the central place in Black lives. “The church is much more than a religious organization; it is the chief organ of social and intellectual intercourse” (1898: 33).

Du Bois did not mention research assistants working with him in Farmville, but he did in subsequent studies, using his own field explorations as an opportunity to provide students with research experience. Du Bois’s third rural study, “The Negro in the Black Belt: Some Social Sketches” (1899b), presented data and observations of selected families within six communities totaling 920 individuals. Data were collected by senior students at Atlanta University who had grown up in those communities. As Jakubek and Wood (2018: 22) point out, this study provides insight into how Du Bois trained his students to engage in the systematic collection of data that could be compared across study sites to produce more generalizable results. The communities differed greatly, and the study “was designed to represent the development of the Negro from country to city life, from semi-barbarism to a fair degree of culture” (401). Each of the community profiles contains one or more tables with descriptive data. As in the Farmville study, information is presented on demographics, family structure, housing conditions, educational levels, and religion. A continuum of conditions, from the “semi-barbarism” of rural farming communities to “a fair degree of culture” in the small towns like Farmville, suggests a pathway toward progress whose characteristics include smaller family sizes due to delayed marriage, better schools, and higher literacy. In his conclusion, Du Bois notes that the six communities fell into three categories: rural country, small village, and town/city. In the countryside most Black farmers lived in “ignorance, poverty, and immorality, beyond the reach of schools and other agencies of civilization for the larger part of the time” (417). To Du Bois, this explained migration

into towns and cities to attain a better life. Focusing attention on successful Blacks living in more urban settings, Du Bois stated that “in them lies the hope of the American Negro” (417).

Du Bois (1901a) followed the approach he used in Farmville in his study of Dougherty County, Georgia, living there for two months so he could observe social life on a day-to-day basis and interview people in their homes. Over 80 percent of Dougherty County residents were Black, living primarily in rural areas outside the town of Albany. In Albany and other trading centers women outnumbered men, reflecting male outmigration in search of employment (as observed in Farmville). Du Bois devoted considerable attention to class distinctions within urban settings as well as rural areas. In the latter, the fifty-seven families who owned the land they farmed were at the top, followed by those who were able to pay cash rent for farmland and provide for their own subsistence. At the bottom of the class hierarchy were tenant farmers (“croppers”) who provided their own labor and that of other household members plus a mule and various farming implements. The landowner provided the land and a simple place to live. At one time, the landowner had also provided for subsistence needs, but Du Bois described how local merchants had taken over that role, providing on credit food, clothing, and other daily necessities, obtaining in return a lien on the tenant’s share of the crop. Since most tenant farmers were nonliterate and the merchants kept account books, the potential for exploitation was forever present.

In “The Negro Landholder of Georgia” (1901a) Du Bois shifted from the sociology of community to the sociology of agriculture. These two topics are core to rural sociology as a discipline, and in both fields Du Bois’s contributions are significant not only for when his work was published (well before the field of rural sociology had been established) but also for their methodological innovations. (Du Bois’s groundbreaking empirical research methods as they relate to rural sociology are the subject of a detailed review by Jakubek and Wood 2018.) In “Landholder,” Du Bois produced a 130-page study of Black landownership in fifty-six counties in Georgia, based on data collected from individual counties, reporting that by 1891, twenty-five years after the end of the Civil War, Black landholding in Georgia had reached the million-acre mark (1901a: 669). Farmland ownership data for 1899 were not presented only in aggregate form but also were broken down by acres and value for all fifty-six counties. Most farms were under fifty acres, but just over 1,000 farmers were in the 100-to-200-acre range, and seventy-five farms were 500 acres or more (672–673). The effort to provide such breakdowns of data reflects Du Bois’s understanding that different farm sizes were important indicators of social and economic differentiation. Other data presented included not only acres and value of land but also other forms of property, including housing and household furniture, livestock, and farm equipment. The study included land and other property in both urban and rural settings. The motive for this study was set out in its opening sentence: “one of the greatest problems of emancipation in the United States was the relation of the freemen to the land” (647). He continued: “it is of the greatest sociological interest to study the steps by which this property was accumulated and to note the tendencies past and present. Perhaps there could be found no other single index of the results of the struggle of the freeman upward so significant as the ownership of land; and as a tremendous social experiment the question of the relation of the freemen to the soil is among the most important of our day” (648). As with his two published community studies, Du Bois presented data in numerous tables, and in this study for the first time he employed maps detailing the growth of Black populations in each census period from 1790 to 1900, showing the gradual spread of enslaved people from coastal counties across the state. He also employed maps to document the assessed value of Black property by county for each census period from 1874 to 1900, reflecting an awareness that spatial patterns are important for understanding social patterns.

In “Landholder,” Du Bois provided not only data but also insight into how Black families initially had been able to obtain land, noting that the plantation system of agriculture concentrated on only the most productive land, leaving marginal lands and swamps unused. These lands were readily available to recently freed Black farm families because prior to the Civil War, plantation owners only cultivated the most productive lands (Du Bois 1901a: 665). The work involved in turning marginal swamp into productive

farmland was one theme in Du Bois's first novel, *The Quest for the Silver Fleece*. In that novel, Du Bois also described the evolution of sharecropping relationships between landholders and tenants from the "credit-lien" system he had described in Dougherty County.

In "The Negro Farmer" (1906) Du Bois used published 1890 census data to document farm sizes and values following the pattern of "Landholder," presenting data at the national, regional, and state levels with particular attention to states with the largest numbers of Black farmers. Buttell, Larson, and Gillespie (1990: 3) called this study "the first comprehensive information about the status of black farmers." Nationally, 41 percent of all Black households were farm households, though the numbers fall to single digits in the Northeast and West (70). A total of 13.6 million acres of land were owned by Black owner/operators; 15.9 million acres were farmed by families who increased their farming production by renting additional land (83). The most common farm was in the twenty-to-fifty-acre range and was called a "one-mule farm" because this was the size that could be operated by a man, his family, and one mule. Du Bois reported that over half of all Black farms were in five contiguous states stretching westward from South Carolina through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana (70) and that rates of tenancy were highest in these cotton-growing states (82). Across these states of the "cotton belt," 85–90 percent of all income reported by Black farmers was derived from cotton (77). Nearly half of the Black population of the United States lived in these five states. Tenant farmers in these and other states generally grew cotton year after year at the insistence of landowners because cotton was a crop that could be readily turned into cash. Du Bois again described various forms of tenancy and identified the credit-lien system as the most prevalent one in cotton growing regions.

As with his other studies, "The Negro Farmer" is full of tables (31) and maps (3) covering the geographic distribution of Black farms, ownership and tenure status, livestock and farm equipment ownership, crops grown, and the costs and earnings of farm production. Longitudinal data on Black landownership were available for Georgia in "Landholder" but not for other states. Du Bois criticized the 1890 and 1900 census data for not making adequate distinction between different forms of tenure, and for reporting on farm operators rather than farm owners, suggesting that the census data overstated the extent of Black farmland ownership. Du Bois presented two maps to illustrate the regional differences. One map showed counties where in 1890 at least 50 percent of all farms were owned and operated by Black farmers. The second map showed counties where Black farmers were operators but not owners. As Jakubek and Wood (2018) note, the two maps are nearly perfect inverse images of each other.

In his summary for "The Negro Farmer," Du Bois concluded that two kinds of conditions were evident in the Black Belt. In one, economic conditions were favorable, and Blacks migrated to, or remained in, that region "and enjoy[ed] there a fair degree of agricultural prosperity" (98). In the other type of region, conditions were less favorable, and out-migration was made difficult by the fact that educational opportunities were limited, so that those who left would bring few skills with them. In addition, the form of tenancy prevalent in this type of region made cotton production profitable, driving up the cost of land. He recognized that both conditions could occur simultaneously in the same region but broader patterns could be mapped.

That Du Bois devoted attention to rural life is not surprising, given that the 1900 census showed that 90 percent of all Blacks lived in the South and 76 percent of them lived in rural areas (Maloney 1992). However much he may have seen the urban and educated Black as the vanguard of Black progress, and therefore the main focus of his scholarship, the conditions of rural Blacks did not escape his attention. In addition to the series of four studies published by the Bureau of Labor and his Dougherty County study, he also published his novel set in the rural South (*The Quest for the Silver Fleece*) and an article, "The Rural South" (1912). These academic and literary works shed critical light on both Black and white populations in the rural South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and shared with *The Philadelphia Negro* research methodologies that were well in advance of their time, including the collection of systematic survey data, ethnographic engagement through residence in the study communities, and the use of census and other

available secondary data. Such triangulation of research methods did not become common in mainstream social sciences until decades later (Morris 2015; Wright 2008).

Du Bois conducted an additional rural study, which unfortunately has been lost. With Bureau of Labor support, in 1906 Du Bois launched his most ambitious rural project, a study of sharecropping in Lowndes County, Alabama: “The Economics of Emancipation: A Social Study of the Alabama Black Belt” (Formwalt 2013; Jeffries 2009). Du Bois assembled a team of over a dozen field researchers, including Richard R. Wright, Jr., and Monroe Work, and used survey instruments to collect data from Black farmers. The effort met with local opposition from the white population, and Du Bois noted later that some of his field researchers were confronted with shotguns (1968: 226). After revisions, the Bureau accepted the handwritten report but did not publish it, deeming it too political. When Du Bois asked that the manuscript be returned, he was told it had been destroyed (Du Bois 1968). He had not retained a copy, and so the study was lost.

In reviewing these studies, Jakubek and Wood (2018) noted that Du Bois’s research findings cover topics of contemporary interest to rural sociologists, including detailed community studies and the impact of changing structure of agriculture. The community studies and particularly the structure of agriculture studies were thick with descriptive statistics and insightful observations. Du Bois found reason for both optimism and pessimism. In his community studies he saw social, economic, and moral progress being made in village trading centers and towns. In contrast, he was pessimistic about the prospects of Blacks living in isolated rural settings where they lacked access to education and opportunity, and he wondered why, even in the face of steady out-migration from such areas, more did not leave (Du Bois 1901a). Du Bois followed these community studies with two studies that examined in detail the structure of agriculture. Du Bois recognized that village centers and towns offered opportunities and attracted migrants from rural areas, it was in the rural South where most Blacks continued to live, and it was in farming that most Blacks made their living. The progression of these studies shows an increased awareness that opportunities for progress were available for the rural Black population, but unevenly so; and that this unevenness was due to the fact that Black farmers who owned their land had some opportunities, while those who worked as tenant farmers had virtually none. He became increasingly critical of the lack of opportunities available to Black farmers, particularly tenant farmers, and he experienced the frustration of his major research effort never seeing the light of day because certain white politicians considered his work a challenge to the status quo.

## Rural Sociology as a Discipline

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Rural sociology as a discipline shares much with the broader discipline of sociology, including theories, methods, and some overlap in membership. Since early in the twentieth century, sociology in the United States has grappled primarily with the social consequences of issues associated with rapid urbanization driven by industrial growth and the arrival of migrants from Europe and the migration of Blacks out of the US South. The discipline of rural sociology emerged in the early twentieth century with a focus on how rural America fit into the larger national whole, not as a remnant of the past but as a contributing component in that whole.

Unlike the general field of sociology, which first arose in Europe, the field of rural sociology had its start in the United States. Several courses on rural sociology were taught at US universities toward the end of the nineteenth century (Nelson 1969; Sanderson 1917), but it was the publication of the Country Life Commission Report (1909) that gave the field its early momentum. The Commission, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to investigate living conditions in rural areas of the United States, provided the impetus for work on a broad range of rural issues. In this landscape, early rural sociology began to grow. In 1913, John M. Gillette published the first textbook on rural sociology, and courses were being offered

across many universities (Sanderson 1917). In 1919, the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life was established in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA); Larson and Zimmerman 2003). The Rural Section of the American Sociological Society was formalized in 1921, ultimately giving rise to the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) in 1937.

From its inception, rural sociology has had a strong orientation toward applied research addressing practical problems in rural America (Brunner 1957; Gillette 1922: 8; Nelson 1969). Much of the early work of rural sociologists focused on quality-of-life issues within rural communities, detailing the challenges of rural isolation and limited resources within small towns to support schools and other social infrastructure. The land-grant university system quickly emerged as an important institutional home for rural sociology.

Land-grant universities had been created by the Morrill Act of 1862 to provide practical education in the agricultural and mechanical arts; these universities exist in every state of the nation. A second Morrill Act in 1890 established a set of historically Black colleges and universities located primarily in the South as land-grant universities. Founded during the Jim Crow era, these universities were important resources for Black farmers and communities, but they struggled—and continue to struggle—with inadequate funding (Congressional Research Service 2021; Harris 1990; Mayberry 1976; Thompson 1990). In 1994, a set of universities serving Native American populations were included as a third category of land-grant universities.

Two other pieces of federal legislation bear mention. The Smith Lever Act of 1914 established the Cooperative Extension System to provide a channel for agricultural and other research at land-grant universities to be shared directly with farmers and the public in general. Because farmers faced social and economic issues, this led to “a rapid increase in the interest in rural sociology” (Sanderson 1917: 433). The Purnell Act of 1925 increased research funding and officially authorized using funds for sociological research designed to improve rural life. In so doing, the legislation “established the legitimacy of rural sociology as a research discipline.” In 1926, twenty-seven states reported conducting rural sociological research (Nelson 1969: 86–89). Today rural sociologists are scattered across many types of universities, in state and federal government agencies and in nonprofit organizations, and continue to have a strong presence in an important set of 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities.

## Early Interactions between Du Bois and Rural Sociologists

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Evidence of rural sociology’s awareness of Du Bois dates back to its beginnings (Zimmerman 2022). Two of Du Bois’s studies, “The Negro Land Holder of Georgia” (1901a) and “The Negro Farmer” (1906), were cited in the first rural sociology textbook, Gillette’s *Constructive Rural Sociology*, published in 1913. These citations carried over into the second edition (1916) as well as in Gillette’s 1922 book simply titled *Rural Sociology*. In this volume, Du Bois’s 1912 article “The Rural South” was cited in a discussion of unequal tenant–landlord relations that put Black farmers in a condition of “peonage” (Gillette 1922: 282). “The Rural South” and Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) also were cited in John Phelan’s anthology *Readings in Rural Sociology* (1920) as recommended resources for further reading. In addition to Du Bois, Phelan cited other Black scholars as well, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, George Edmund Haynes, and Kelly Miller, and the Black leader Booker T. Washington (whose “The Rural Negro and the South” was included in the anthology itself).

The widely influential *Systematic Source Book in Rural Sociology* (Sorokin, Zimmerman, and Galpin 1932) was another place where Du Bois’s works were cited. O. D. Duncan, who later served as president of the RSS (1952–1953) wrote in his review that “no sociologist can afford to try to work where he cannot have the Source Book at his elbow” (1932: 196). Three decades later, the three volumes of the *Source Book* were described as a “monumental” contribution to the discipline (Nelson 1969: 69). In addition to Du Bois, Sorokin, Zimmerman, and Galpin also cited other Black scholars, including Charles S. Johnson, Henderson

H. Donald, Emmett J. Scott, and Sadie T. Mossell, and the *Negro Yearbook* published at Tuskegee under the guidance of Monroe Work. Du Bois's work also was announced in a periodical intended to draw attention to works relevant for those working in the unit and was published by the USDA's Bureau of Agricultural Economics, which included the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, the institutional home of rural sociology within the USDA (Lacy 1940).

Du Bois left Atlanta University in 1910 to work as research director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and founded its monthly magazine, the *Crisis*. Du Bois continued writing, but with more limited production of empirical research, and with greater attention to urban rather than rural issues. Rural sociologists continued to cite his work but increasingly came to cite more recent research, including work by Black sociologists such as Charles S. Johnson (who was a member of the founding board of contributing editors for the journal *Rural Sociology*).

Another instance can be found when T. Lynn Smith (president of the RSS, 1942–1943) cited Du Bois in his 1947 textbook and on at least two different occasions interacted with Du Bois during that decade (Zimmerman 2022). T. Lynn Smith's work with Du Bois dates back to a 1941 USDA-supported farmer discussion group held at Prairie View A&M University, an 1890 land-grant university (Prairie View State College 1942). The USDA held these discussion groups, called the "Philosophy Institutes," across the nation; each addressed a wide range of questions from the nature of democracy and the role of government to social policy, education, and local issues around enhancing rural life (Jewett 2013; Taeusch 1940; 1941). Joining Du Bois and Smith were Charles S. Johnson from Fisk University and Frederick Douglass Patterson, the third president of Tuskegee.

Smith and Du Bois came together again after Du Bois's return to Atlanta University (Zimmerman 2022). Du Bois sought to reignite his dream of a one-hundred-year program of comprehensive and long-term research on African Americans. To do this, he reached out to the presidents of the 1890 land-grant institutions. At the first of the two conferences Du Bois organized, held in 1943, representatives of each university presented information about work already under way at their institutions (Du Bois 1943). Importantly, Smith made this statement to the conference attendees: "the advice of sociologists at institutions for whites should be sought from time to time as the work goes along; but not to the extent that there is any tendency at any institution for the white man to determine, even by suggestion, what shall be done by the Negro" (Du Bois 1943: 50).

Du Bois organized a second follow-up conference, which was held the next year (Du Bois 1944). As in the first conference, Du Bois again called on prominent sociologists to comment on the endeavor. While Smith had been part of the first conference, for the second conference a different rural sociologist was invited, O. D. (Otis Durant) Duncan at Oklahoma State University, who had been recommended to Du Bois by Mozell Hill at Langston University, the 1890 land-grant university there.<sup>1</sup>

Years later, Smith noted in his article on the history of rural sociology: "for many years I was personally acquainted with practically everyone teaching or doing research in anything having to do with the sociology of rural life in the Southern Region, and this includes a dozen or so Negro sociologists, who, we should never forget, made fundamental contributions in the development of our science" (1971: 88). In the attached footnote, Smith continued: "a few of the more noted of these are Charles S. Johnson, whose highly productive career was at Fisk University; E. Franklin Frazer of Howard University, Mozelle Hill and W. E. B. Du Bois with whom I worked while they were at Atlanta University, and Charles G. Gomillion of Tuskegee Institute" (1971: 98; Zimmerman 2022). While Smith acknowledges working with these important Black scholars, research has only just begun on disentangling the nature of the relationships referenced in this quote.

One difficulty in addressing the question of the influence Du Bois had on rural sociology is that the routine practice of citing the work of others in sociology and rural sociology is a predominantly post-World War II phenomenon. Arthur Raper, for example, provided no citations or reference section in his *Preface to Peasantry*, a 427-page ethnography of two counties in Georgia published by the University of North Carolina Press (1936). Raper taught at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta from 1932 to 1939 and coauthored the book *Sharecroppers All* (1941) with Ira De A. Reid, a colleague of Du Bois at Atlanta University during Du Bois's second period of time there (1934–1944). Reid was managing editor of *Phylon* while Du Bois was serving as editor-in-chief of this journal. Raper and Reid (1940) coauthored the lead article in the first edition of *Phylon* describing working conditions for Blacks in the South. No Du Bois citation appears in either the *Phylon* article or *Sharecroppers All*. Raper and Reid certainly were well acquainted with Du Bois, and the absence of citations simply reflected academic practice of the time.

If we use the 1913 publication date of Gillette's *Constructive Rural Sociology* as a starting point, for the first thirty years of rural sociology's history, there were leading scholars within rural sociology who were aware of, respected, and interacted with not only Du Bois but also other Black scholars. These linkages are important, but with the information currently available we cannot say what influence Du Bois had on the work of Smith, Raper, or other rural sociologists. We do know that there were leaders in the field who recognized that Du Bois was an expert on the rural South based on his groundbreaking work during the early years of his career. Opportunity for further research on the influence of Du Bois on the development of rural sociology as a discipline exists in the archives and correspondence of Du Bois, Raper, and other early scholars of rural America.

## Progressive Rural Research Comes under Political Attack

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In the 1940s and 1950s, conservative political forces emerged that were critical of progressive social science research. For rural sociology, with its unique linkages with the federal government, these changes were particularly important. The USDA's Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, established in 1919, was the first and for a time the only unit in the federal government devoted to sociological research of any kind (Larson and Zimmerman 2003). The Division attracted dedicated and talented people, including thirteen people who would become presidents of the RSS and three presidents of the American Sociological Association (Zimmerman 2015: 36). Smith (1947: 13) noted that the Division's work was "by far the most dominant element in the field of rural sociological research" and was "the most important supporter and organizer of rural sociology in the United States" (Fuguitt 2009: 39; Wimberley 1991: 18–19).

Over its thirty-four years, the Division conducted key investigations into the nature of rural life across the nation. One of these was a set of seventy-one cultural reconnaissance surveys begun in the early 1940s (Larson and Zimmerman 2003: 104–106). The study on rural Coahoma County, Mississippi, was the first to be completed (Alexander 1944). Including descriptions of pervasive segregation and discrimination, the report elicited serious political attack because it described the existence of racial inequality (Larson and Zimmerman 2003: 51–53; Zimmerman 2008). Other community studies conducted by the Division described racial divides, but what made the Coahoma County study important was that a draft copy not intended for circulation made its way around corridors of power in Mississippi.

As Yvonne Oliver summarized the political orientation of the Division (and its parent unit, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics), it was "fairly progressive, as indicated by its professed commitment to helping rural blacks" (2003: 184), but this did not come without a price. Documenting racial inequality in Coahoma County brought outrage from white political leaders in the state and was used in the next congressional appropriation hearings to undermine the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and with it the Division. Mississippi congressman Jamie Whitten said that the report contained "vicious attacks on a county and its

people” (US Congress, House 1946: 238) and was a “gross misrepresentation” and an “indictment” of the “fine folks” of Coahoma County and that the people of the county were “getting along in perfect harmony” (241). The backlash against the Coahoma study led to funding cuts as well as the specific legislative direction that no funds were to be used for conducting “cultural surveys.” The seventy-one cultural reconnaissance surveys project was brought to an abrupt halt, none of the seventy-one studies was ever published by the USDA, and only thirty-one internal draft reports have been found (Larson and Zimmerman 2003: 104–106; Larson, Moe, and Zimmerman 1992).

The budget cuts and restrictions that came with the 1946 appropriations bill saw the beginning of the end for the Division. In 1953, Ezra Benson became the first Republican in two decades to be secretary of agriculture. Less than a year after taking the position, he abolished by executive order the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, within which the Division was housed. In this way the work of the Division, which had been “the most important supporter and organizer of rural sociology in the United States,” came to an end (Fuguitt 2009: 39). Many rural sociologists who were working at the USDA at the time moved into academic positions, often at land-grant institutions (Gilbert 2015; Wimberley 1991: 24–25; Zimmerman 2015). Even after the Division had been shut down, in 1955 Congressman Jaime Whitten again singled out rural sociology as USDA research that was “nonessential and nonproductive” (Zimmerman 2015: 42).

The Coahoma County study completed in 1944 was not the only instance of rural sociology running counter to powerful interests. At nearly the same time, Goldschmidt’s 1944 California study documented negative social effects of absentee owned industrial agriculture, a critique that cast industrial interests in a poor light. Like Du Bois’s Lowndes County study, Goldschmidt’s study was at first suppressed. But unlike Du Bois’s Lowndes County study, Goldschmidt’s California study ultimately was published, first in 1946 as a committee report of the U.S. Senate (Goldschmidt 1946) and ultimately as a book (Goldschmidt 1978).

## Rural Sociology Returns to Its Roots

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Like sociology and other social science disciplines, in the 1950s rural sociology adopted a more consensus-based theoretical orientation with a positivistic and increasingly quantitative approach. The emergence of mainframe and later personal computers also facilitated such quantitative work. During this time, demographic research “exploded,” as did the focus on the adoption and diffusion of agricultural technology and practices (Wimberley 1991: 27). From then until recently, recognition of Du Bois as a rural scholar faded. In addition to the methodological and theoretical changes sweeping the discipline, it also was the case that the earlier generation of rural sociologists that had included those who interacted with Du Bois were coming to the end of their professional careers.

In the 1970s, researchers in rural sociology began returning to its more critical and progressive roots. In comparing the research record of the 1920s and 1930s with that of the 1970s and 1980s, Hooks notes: “in both generations the emphasis is on exposing inequalities and inequities, not obscuring them” (Hooks 1986: 1). It was in this context that rural sociologists began to again recognize the importance and relevance of Du Bois’s work (Jakubek and Wood 2018). As a result, Du Bois’s early work has been cited by researchers in the sociology of agriculture (e.g., Buttel, Larson, and Gillespie 1990) and in accounts of rural sociology’s history (e.g., Constance 2014; Jaffee and Gertler 2017; Larson and Zimmerman 2003) as well as in contemporary research (e.g., Ashwood 2018; Bailey, Jensen, and Ransom 2014; Bailey and Thomson 2022; Carrillo, King, and Schafft 2021; Quisumbing et al. 2018).

## Insights and Guidance

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Rural sociologists today would benefit from incorporating two central insights that guided Du Bois during his long career: the centrality of race and the importance of a moral purpose guiding teaching, research, and outreach/Cooperative Extension.

### The Color Line and Critical Race Theory

At the Pan-African Conference of 1900 in London, Du Bois identified race relations as the central concern of the twentieth century: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the question as to how far differences of race—which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair—will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization” (1900). To Du Bois, racial discrimination was a central reality that had to be addressed not only in the United States but globally. Du Bois recognized that racism was a weapon used by colonizing powers to fuel global capitalism (Rabaka 2021). He understood the importance of economic class in a capitalist system fueled by colonial exploitation, but he maintained that race was an elemental factor shaping human relationships, and that the central question of the twentieth century was how the benefits of civilization could be shared broadly among all regardless of race. Were he alive today, we can imagine Du Bois arguing that the race question has not been settled but has shifted and expanded to include population movements from Africa into Europe and from Latin America into the United States. These movements have precipitated right-wing populist, nativist, and fascist political responses among white populations, demonstrating that the color line remains a social reality well into the twenty-first century.

The continued centrality of race in defining human relationships requires explanation by rural sociologists and others. Du Bois’s work has contemporary relevance as a foundation for critical race theory through his detailed descriptive analysis of prejudice and discrimination in social, economic, political, legal, and educational institutions not only in the United States but also globally (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Rashid 2011). Legal protections established during the mid-twentieth-century civil rights era did not eradicate racism but caused it to go underground. It took on covert forms that allowed it become invisible to whites, and so much a part of the fabric of non-Black life that non-Blacks experience racism as “normal” and not aberrational (Delgado and Stefancic 2017: 8). This normalization of racism has been challenged by activists associated with “Black Lives Matter” and other social justice efforts. For rural sociologists and others working in the rural United States, understanding racism is central to issues related to environmental justice, limited educational opportunities for Black urban and rural populations, discriminatory dimensions that persist within the nation’s legal system, and persistent poverty in predominantly Black rural communities and urban neighborhoods. Sociologists in general and rural sociologists in particular have been slow to adopt critical race theory as an emancipatory tool to reveal the roots of racism (Bailey and Thomson 2022).

## Moral Purpose

Du Bois began his academic research career in the Jim Crow South in an academic environment dominated by white social Darwinists and proponents of scientific eugenics who held that Blacks were physically, intellectually, and culturally inferior to those of European ancestry. Du Bois set out to challenge these views through objective scientific research in Farmville, with “the one object of ascertaining, with as near an approach to scientific accuracy as possible, the real condition of the Negro” (Du Bois 1898: 1). A sense of optimism and purpose is displayed on the final page of “Farmville”: “finally, it remains to be noted that the whole group life of Farmville Negroes is pervaded by a peculiar hopefulness on the part of the people themselves. No one of them doubts in the least but that one day black people will have all rights they are now striving for, and that the Negro will be recognized among the earth’s great peoples. Perhaps this simple faith is, of all products of emancipation, the one of the greatest social and economic value” (38). The reality of life as a Black man in the South was inescapable and tempered Du Bois’s optimism. In 1899, the year Du Bois published *The Philadelphia Negro*, news reached him that Sam Hose had been lynched and his knuckles put on display in an Atlanta grocery store. Recounting this episode in his autobiography (1968: 222), Du Bois wrote:

two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and secondly, there was no definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing, as I had confidently assumed would be easily forthcoming. I regarded it as axiomatic that the world wanted to learn the truth and if the truth were sought with even approximate accuracy and painstaking devotion, the world would gladly support the effort. This was, of course, but a young man’s idealism, not by any means false, but also never universally true.

Du Bois recognized early in his career that purely objective research was an unattainable goal. In *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899b), he wrote: “convictions on all great matters of human interest one must have to a greater or less degree, and they will enter to some degree into the most cold-blooded scientific research as a disturbing factor” (3).

Jakubek and Wood (2018) characterize Du Bois’s rural research as “emancipatory empiricism” focused on social justice and documenting social progress in Black communities. To Du Bois, these were the “great matters of human interest.” In our view, Du Bois conducted research with these moral purposes in mind: to debunk the views of those who refused to accept Black humanity, to identify sources of injustice, and to point the way forward toward future progress of Black America. To Du Bois, research was not simply about accumulating facts; its purpose was to identify and challenge the roots of racism and promote positive social change.

Du Bois studied Black communities in rural areas because that was where most Black people in the United States lived. He studied farming systems because most rural Blacks worked in agriculture. In his agrarian studies, Du Bois identified the vulnerability of tenant farmers to unscrupulous landlords and merchants as a primary cause of poverty. Du Bois described the tenancy systems of the South as a form of peonage that through contract labor laws, vagrancy laws, and manipulation of credit accounts with landlords and merchants tied Black workers to the land with little hope of making more than a bare subsistence living. The unfolding of Du Bois’s rural research began with optimistic description and became increasingly critical of rural injustices imposed on Black farmers. Morris (2015: 44) characterizes Du Bois’s work as “political sociology stressing power, economic exploitation, and social oppression as producers and sustainers of racial inequality.” We argue that this research agenda also had a moral purpose. To put it simply, Du Bois chose his research topics because they were central to the challenges faced by Black people of his day. As his understanding grew and he matured as a research scholar, Du Bois began a shift from chronicler of conditions to an advocate of change (Williams 2006: 381). This does not mean that Du Bois abandoned the

search for truth but that the truths he sought were chosen with moral purpose and with the intention to effect positive social, economic, and political change. We understand that it is a tall order for contemporary colleagues in rural sociology or other disciplines to embrace social engagement as Du Bois did. But perhaps scholars can be inspired to consider who will benefit from our work when we embark on research or outreach/Cooperative Extension projects, or choose what material we present to our students. All of these decisions are choices, and the question is by what light are such choices made.

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## Note

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