**Essay #3**

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SOCL 401: Sociological Theory

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April 20, 2024

W.E.B Du Bois, born William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, was an American sociologist. He was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts on February 23, 1868, five days after the Emancipation Proclamation (Green & Smith, 1983). Du Bois was the first African American to earn a PhD in history at Harvard University. He also attended Fisk University and University of Berlin (Wesley, 1965). After obtaining his PhD, he became a professor of history, sociology, and economics at schools such as Wilberforce, University of Pennsylvania, and Atlanta University (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Du Bois was known for being one of the founders of the NAACP as well as American Sociology (Grether, 2024). Throughout his lifetime, his theories and concepts addressed racial issues and tensions that were prevalent in that era. He died in Accra, Ghana on August 27, 1963, at ninety-five years old.

**Major Concerns**

At first, Du Bois was primarily interested in history rather than sociology. During his time teaching in Philadelphia, his focus shifted slightly away from history into sociological conditions that affected people of color. In 1915, he began to write about African history and culture, which was rare at this time. The concept of racial inferiority and African savagery was a common American mindset. Du Bois criticized Reconstruction works by James Ford Rhodes, John W. Burgess, and William H. Dunning. He knew that Rhodes was a labor exploiter, Burgess a slaveholder, and Dunning a Copperhead; they had established a group of graduate students who held and promoted their biased, racist views (Wesley, 1965). Wesley (1965) included a quote that Du Bois wrote:

They had been born and reared in the bitterest period of Southern race hatred, fear and contempt. Their instinctive reactions were confirmed and encouraged in the best of American universities. Their scholarship, when it regarded black men, became deaf, dumb, and blind. The clearest evidence of Negro ability, work, honesty, patience, learning and efficiency became distorted into cunning, brute toil, shrewd evasion, cowardice and imitation—a stupid effort to transcend nature’s law (p. 156-157).

He was criticizing the treatment of black men in society; certain behaviors and actions were encouraged amongst white men, but when black men participated, they were ignored and portrayed as dangerous and intimidating. The main goal for Du Bois was to give African Americans a voice; he wanted them to be heard. He was for African Americans in history while most of society was against them. The community was faced with environmental pressures, but the struggle was worth it (Wesley, 1965). W.E.B Du Bois’ theoretical ideas and concepts were influenced by racism and racial tensions during that time in society. Although these social issues persist, Du Bois’ influence has made an impact.

**Theoretical Contributions**

Du Bois’ primary focus was race and racism in America through a sociological lens. Some of his most well-known concepts include the color line, race as a social construct, and Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory (Grether, 2024).

**The Color Line**

The first theoretical concept by Du Bois is the color line, which is the analytical attention of how race was and still is an organizational being in society. It draws attention to the experiences of being in and living in a society based on racist ideas and institutions. There are two concepts from Du Bois to better understand the color line: the veil and double consciousness. The veil is a concept in which black people see the world differently than white people, based upon how race and racism impact their social experiences. There are three characteristics of the veil: the darker skin of black people being a physical difference from white people, barriers preventing white people from seeing black people as “true” Americans, and barriers preventing black people from setting themselves apart from what white Americans categorize them as. The veil is supposed to help white people understand the black experience in America, however, it filters how white people view black people and race through racial prejudice. Double consciousness is when black identity is divided into two, which makes having a unified identity difficult. Going back to the veil, it prevents black people from having self-consciousness, which forces them to have double. The first identity is an understanding of themselves and their place within their families and communities, and the second identity is viewing themselves through others who see them as different or inferior. Double consciousness explains how being both black and American creates social tension. By reconciling double consciousness, it can help end the racist system of America (Grether, 2024).

**Race as a Social Construct**

Race is not biological, but rather a social construction used to place people into categories based on physical, observable differences, such as hair texture, skin color, and facial structure. Race is created through social interactions and serves as a factor in how social institutions operate and function (Grether, 2024). Du Bois stated that race is the center of the problem within world democracy and will be the problem of the future. He also makes a point that America focuses too much on race rather than the economic needs of the entire labor class. Du Bois did not see race and class as accidental, but instead foundations of capitalist social relations (Green & Smith, 1983). Sociologists like Du Bois analyze how the social construction of race causes racial inequality.

**Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory**

There are two characteristics of Critical Theory. First, power structures within social institutions and cultures are spread. Second, social problems within society are the result of an extreme power imbalance. This can happen institutionally, culturally, and individually, however the individual level does not have the same effect. Du Bois expanded upon Critical Theory to create Critical Race Theory. It applies the characteristics of Critical Theory to study race, racism, and power. The goal of Critical Race Theory is to unveil and critique racially oppressive social structures, meanings, and ideas to combat racism. It also explains how racism is engrained in American culture and social institutions. However, this is different from individual acts of racism; one can live in a racist society even if individual acts of racism are not present. Power structures within society are based on white privilege and supremacy, which marginalizes people of color. Du Bois wanted conditions for black Americans to change; he saw the “talented tenth” as a role for social change. The “talented tenth” is an argument that one in ten black men are leaders in the black community because they have a college education, are published writers, advocate for social change, and are successful. Alongside Du Bois, other sociological theorists like Harriett Martineau, Karl Marx, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Marianne Weber, Jane Addams, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are advocates for social change (Grether, 2024).

**DuBois’ Influence Today**

Du Bois’ contributions to sociology as well as modern society have influenced the way people see the world. Although Critical Race Theory is banned in K-12 schools, specifically in Virginia (although it was never taught in the first place), education about race and racism in a university setting is extremely important. Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin banned Critical Race Theory on January 15, 2022; he felt that children should be learning math, science, history, reading, and other areas rather than learning about race. In his executive order, he states:

This denies our students the opportunity to gain important facts, core knowledge, formulate their own opinions, and to think for themselves. Our children deserve far better from their education than to be told what to think (Youngkin, p. 1, 2022).

It seems as though Youngkin does not believe children are capable of understanding the truth about Virginia history, thus banning Critical Race Theory. In a university setting, students are more mature and have the ability to grasp race and racism in a more serious atmosphere rather than a K-12 setting. Another example of Du Bois’ influence is from a personal experience in another class. In a class I have taken, Racial and Environmental Justice at Longwood University, I had written an essay by drawing information from the book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. The basis of the prompt was to analyze a quote by Naomi Murakawa, associate professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. She said, “If the problem of the twentieth century was, in W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous words, ‘the problem of the color line’, then the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of colorblindness, the refusal to acknowledge the causes and consequences of enduring racial stratification”. When writing, I learned about the concept of the color line in addition to new information regarding race and racism in contemporary society. Du Bois had an influence on Murakawa in order for her to make that statement, which influenced me when I was writing the essay. Du Bois’ concepts and theories are still relevant in contemporary society because the issues he advocated for are still present.

**References**

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