



## Du Bois on sociology, double consciousness and imagination

Michael Halewood & Michael Thomas

**To cite this article:** Michael Halewood & Michael Thomas (18 Feb 2026): Du Bois on sociology, double consciousness and imagination, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2026.2619629](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2026.2619629)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2026.2619629>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Feb 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 430



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Du Bois on sociology, double consciousness and imagination

Michael Halewood <sup>a</sup> and Michael Thomas<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Essex, Colchester, United Kingdom; <sup>b</sup>University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

This article explores Du Bois' specific understanding of Sociology, arguing that he utilized and developed a specific form of active imagining. Du Bois' use of imagination is a *process of reimagining*, grounded in his experience of racialized modernity. He uses sociological narratives to redirect the imaginations of his audiences by teaching them to see what they have been trained to ignore. Simultaneously, he develops and deploys ways of thinking about race that avoid past assumptions of black inferiority. He describes how different (racialized) social groups are constituted amid the weave of labor conditions which produce the historical, political and "real" possibilities that matter not only for these groups but for societies, nations, indeed, the world as a whole. He contributes to the development of sociological thought by directing its attention to the processes at work in social problems, the activities of groups, the production of double consciousness and the operations of environments.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 July 2025  
Accepted 13 January 2026

### KEYWORDS

Du Bois; imagination; double consciousness; race; sociology; groups

## Introduction

This article provides an analysis of Du Bois's specific conception of Sociology.<sup>1</sup> This is offered as a partial redress to the sidelining of Du Bois which, as Morris (2015) argues, manifests the racialized character of the development of the discipline. It also means that Sociology is less than it could have been, and we will argue that a recognition of Du Bois's multi-faceted concept of imagination is not only crucial to understanding his theoretical and empirical work; it opens up new avenues of inquiry. When matters of imagination are raised within sociological circles, thoughts tend to turn to Wright Mills (2000 [1959]), whose phrase "*the* sociological imagination" is often used to frame introductory courses to Sociology. The use of a definite article appears to provide *the* definition of imagination within Sociology, tacitly excluding other forms.<sup>2</sup> Through its discussions of Du Bois on Double Consciousness, Problems, and Groups, this article seeks to demonstrate that his version of imagination is not simply a process of "thinking otherwise"; it can be read as a situated, speculative approach to tracing social relationships through reorienting existing abstractions and recasting their implications into new narratives that correspond to the actual historical conditions of societies.

**CONTACT** Michael Halewood  m.halewood@essex.ac.uk

Du Bois' use of imagination is, in fact, *a process of reimagining*, grounded in his experience of racialized modernity. He problematizes the categories of Sociology by identifying their racialized origins and recasting them in forms drawn from the historical experience of black<sup>3</sup> people; those whose experiences are excluded by "the veil" of "the color line" (Du Bois 1997 [1904], 39). However, Du Bois is clear that the "problem of the color line" is not limited to the experiences of one group. It constitutes the epistemological horizon of modernity. In this respect, Du Bois aims to teach people to see something that their imagination is trained to ignore, and this involves walking them out from the familiar to the unfamiliar. As a result, Du Bois is compelled to interact with the dominant forms of imagining that structure the groups that he addresses, as he attempts to shift their form of imagination in a novel but grounded direction. This is one function of "Double Consciousness" (Du Bois 1997 [1904], 40), which represents an important element of Du Bois' specific, imaginative contribution to Sociology. For this reason, an analysis of this key concept will make up the second main section of the article. Double consciousness involves a specific use of imagination, which enables individuals to move between worlds without losing contact with their own group environment. As will be seen, Du Bois' position as a member of a "problem people" enables him to experience the failure of the abstraction of "the negro problem" and to capture the conditions under which black people are unable to fully articulate and develop their group ends. The importance of *reimagining* the categories of "problems" and "groups" for Du Bois' thought will, therefore, be explored in the following two sections. Following Chandler (2025), we will outline how the problems and groups that Du Bois examines are not only generated by the racist structures that make anti-blackness a seemingly ontological feature of life in the United States; they are indicative of the racialized elements which are constitutive of modernity.

The aim of this article is not simply to add Du Bois' use of imagination to the sociological canon. Du Bois was both a sociologist and more than a sociologist; he displays an active historical imagination, recasting the past to better understand the present. Du Bois also makes use of autobiographical elements as well as what might be termed "speculation". In this regard, we follow Rabaka (2010, 11) who argues that Du Bois has been excluded from Sociology because his transdisciplinarity makes him illegible in classical and contemporary academic discourse. As Thomas (2025, 76) writes:

Du Bois' early essays [...] are a first attempt to tell new stories about race through his own experience, sociological research and political activity, redeploing the concept into a set of new fictions that invert common-sense racism into a false paradigm for apprehending the reality of societies.

Such speculation is not the idle, solely abstract endeavor that some might envisage. To achieve his political purposes, Du Bois renders his arguments in a manner that will appeal to the imagination of his readers. It is in this respect that Du Bois is working in what might be termed a literary-scientific genre that requires a more imaginative approach to Sociology, its abstractions, and their deployment. His concept of the imagination calls for a reimagining of the possibilities and procedures of Sociology while also recognizing that it will take many occasions of active and scholarly imagination to accomplish such a task. Moreover, Du Bois' advocacy of the use of imagination should not be construed merely as a celebration of the inventive capacities of (sociological) thought.

Rather, it enables a broadening of Wright Mills' sociological concept of imagination. The article aims to shed new light on Du Bois' continuing contribution to our understanding of the construction and maintenance of forms of worlds.

## Du Bois on sociology

In his major texts, Du Bois did not spend long on abstract questions regarding the status of "society" and "the social" but he does address these issues in "Sociology Hesitant" (Du Bois 2000 [1905]), a text that comprises Du Bois' response to a congress held in St Louis in 1904, which was billed as "the first International Congress of Arts and Science" covering the natural sciences, the social sciences, and philosophy. Despite his academic standing, Du Bois was not invited to give a talk, but he attended, commenting that "a thing called 'Sociology' [was] hidden under Mental Science, and the things really sociological ranged in a rag-bag and labeled 'Social Regulation'" (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 37).<sup>4</sup> This congress was held as part of the 1904 World's Fair which provides the background to the 1944 Judy Garland musical "Meet Me in St. Louis". The 1904 World Fair also provided forced meetings, through the exhibits of peoples from other countries and cultures in stylized enclosures. One such exhibit, claiming to represent a village in the Congo, included the presence of Ota Benga who would later be displayed in the Bronx Zoo (Newkirk 2015). It is within this strange mix of science, academia, race, representation and entertainment that Du Bois makes his case regarding the character of Sociology.

In "Sociology Hesitant" (2000 [1905]), Du Bois unfolds a history of the development of the discipline. He highlights a confusion within Sociology, which produces what he calls a hesitancy with regard to its subject matter, procedures and purposes. The main interlocutors for Du Bois are Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer and his text is concurrent with Weber's *Protestant Ethic* and follows Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* by approximately nine years. It is, therefore, worth attempting to read Du Bois' text within this context, that is, prior to the settling of the supposed canonical foundations of sociological research methods. As will be seen, Du Bois maintains that Sociology, in 1905, displays a siloed imagination, which attempts to divide and conquer facts, experience and history. He, on the other hand, insists upon a recognition of the horror and joy and mystery which constitute the world and which require a specific kind of reimagining in order to develop robust and adequate investigation. This is the role of Sociology. But to accomplish its promise, it should "open the way for a new unified conception of human Deeds" (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 43). To fully understand Du Bois' notion of "deeds," it is important to see how he situates his thought in relation to the sociological canon of his time through his critique of Comte and Spencer.

Du Bois accuses Comte of the kind of hesitancy that gives his 1905 article its title when he charges him with "steering curiously by the 'Deeds of Men' [*sic*] as objects of scientific study" (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 38), and describes him as "strangely *hesitant* as to the real elements of Society which must sometime be studied" (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 38. Emphasis added). Du Bois also takes Comte to task for fudging the notion of society: Instead of providing a "minute study of men [*sic*] grouping, changing and thinking, [Comte] proposed to study the Group, the Change, and the Thought and call this newly created Thing Society" (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 39). By following Comte, sociology has misrecognized its proper subject matter and procedures. It is the *activity* of grouping, changing and

thinking that should be studied, not the inert categories developed to fix these processes in place.<sup>5</sup> Where Comte attempts to categorize things and concepts, Du Bois sets out to problematize these very concepts, especially in terms of the implicit hierarchies that they both produce and reinforce.<sup>6</sup> As will be discussed further in the sections that follow, this inversion in sociological thought helps produce and maintain the warped sociological analyses that treat racial categories as real in themselves rather than as outcomes of other political, economic and historical processes.

To counter such inverted thinking, Du Bois retains a focus on the notion of “deeds”.

Why did Comte hesitate so strangely at the “parts which constitute” Society, and why have men [*sic*] so strangely followed his leading? Is it not very clear that the object of Sociology is to study the deeds of men [*sic*]? [...] For the Great Assumption of real life is that in the deeds of men [*sic*] there lies along with rule and rhythm – along with physical law and biologic habit, a something Incalculable. This assumption is ever with us; it pervades all our thinking, all our science, all our literature; it lies at the bottom of our conception of legal enactments, philanthropy, crime, education, and ethics; and language has crystallized the thought and belief in Ought and May and Choice. (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 40–41)

Eschewing any abstract conception of society, Du Bois focuses upon the more general term – deeds – which can refer to individual action but also encompasses those things done by other people and, importantly, by *groups* of people. By founding his Sociology on the study of the “real character” of human deeds, he ties it, both epistemologically and ontologically, to analyses of what people do, how they act, and what happens. The interest in, and importance of deeds, is one developing aspect of modernity, or what he terms the “New Age”:

three things at the birth of the New Age bear weighty testimony to an increased and increasing interest in human deeds: the Novel, the Trust, and the Expansion of Europe; the study of individual life and motive, the machine-like organizing of human economic effort, and the extension of all organization to the ends of the earth. (Du Bois 2000 [1905], 38)

Art (“the Novel”), law and economics (“the Trust”), as well as colonialism and imperialism (“the Expansion of Europe”) served as the early impetus for investigation into the structures of human societies, or Society, according to Du Bois. It is within this melange of competing approaches and interests that Sociology *should* find its calling but it has failed to do so. Instead, it has posited a vague notion of a unified but abstract society as the starting point of its investigations. Du Bois traces this tendency to the influence of the work of Herbert Spencer who sought to “trace in the deeds and actions of men great underlying principles of harmony” (Du Bois 2015, 39). His critique of Spencer’s approach is twofold. Spencer, like Comte, inverts the order of analysis and treats the principles as a “mystical Whole” (Du Bois 2015, 39). As he later demonstrates in “The Study of the Negro Problems” (Du Bois 2003 [1898]), this inversion in sociological thought facilitates the production of racist sociological analyses that treat black people as problematic rather than people facing problems due to failures of the societies that they inhabit in a position of exclusion (Gordon 2000, 52). Spencer also sets Sociology on the wrong course through use of inaccurate data, “depending on hearsay, rumor and tradition, vague speculations, traveler’s tales, legends and imperfect documents, the memory of memories and historic error” (Du Bois 2015, 39). It is at this point that Du Bois insists upon the importance of a “scientific” element to Sociology which is to be found in the production of detailed and accurate

data of the “really” real elements of the social world – the deeds of real humans, in real contexts and situations. The task, for Sociology, is not to confuse “Things with Thoughts of Things” (Du Bois 2015, 40), as Spencer does, for this leads “toward metaphysical wanderings” (Du Bois 2015, 39).

In place of these metaphysical and abstract statements, Du Bois holds that with “a new unified conception of human deeds [... we] would no longer have two separate realms of knowledge, speaking a mutually unintelligent<sup>7</sup> language” (Du Bois 2015, 43). This mention of two realms of knowledge could be taken as an allusion to the distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*. Indeed, Gooding-Williams (2009, 37–53) argues that Du Bois’ position on the concept of race, as set out in his early texts (Du Bois 2004 [1897]; 2003 [1898]), should be understood as influenced by the distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, which played an important role in the specific development of Sociology within Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gooding-Williams 2009, 37).

The term “*Geisteswissenschaften*” can be loosely translated as “science of mind (or spirit)” or, perhaps, as “human sciences” and is intended to refer to the specific scope and methods appropriate to the study and analysis of human activities, cultures and societies, as opposed to the study and analysis of nature (which calls for *Naturwissenschaften*). Du Bois would have been directly exposed to this distinction and the ideas that lay behind it during his period of study in Berlin for two years from 1892 when he was taught by Gustav von Schmoller, a leading proponent of the German historical school of economics. He also encountered the ideas of Dilthey and Rickert (Morris 2015, 19–22; Gooding-Williams 2009, 51–52). It is important, however, not to place Du Bois simply *within* the apparently “European” theorizing of “*Geisteswissenschaften*”. Rather, there is a need to reimagine the wider historical and political context within which such theorizing was being developed. For, as Chandler (2025) argues, there was a reciprocity between the US and Europe which needs to be reimaged.

Du Bois’s proposition of “the problem of the color line” [involves] engaging how we conceptualize the historical production of the modern era in general, including the constitution of Europe as idea and practice, and not as pertaining only to those understood as other than European. (Chandler 2025, 82)

It is also evident that Du Bois, while sympathetic to the *Geisteswissenschaften* position, also felt that Sociology *must* engage with science. Indeed, he locates one aspect of Sociology’s “hesitancy” in its insecurity in the face of the natural sciences. He comments, Sociologists should refuse “to be thrown into utter confusion by the questions: Is this a science? Where are your natural laws? What sort of a science is a science without laws?” (Du Bois 2015, 42–43). Throughout his work, Du Bois displays a remarkable faith in a reformulated conception of science and a belief that we can determine what he terms “Chance” (Du Bois 2015, 43).<sup>8</sup> Sociology, in particular, has a duty to “measure carefully the limits of Chance in human conduct” (Du Bois 2015, 44). He also refuses any simple division between the natural and social (or cultural) sciences; and he questions any split between the search for “laws” and the search for “values”, between “statistics” and “interpretation”, between “science” and “meaning”. Du Bois is clear that abstract conceptualizations of what constitutes a society, or “the social realm”, or “social action” or “the group” are representative of, and help produce and reproduce, a version of Sociology

within which theorizing can supposedly be separated from the phenomena or problems that it is supposed to be investigating. There has been a misrecognition of the status of “human deeds”. Empirical studies have, instead, presupposed an abstraction, namely that of “the pliable and law-abiding ‘Economic Man’” (Du Bois 2015, 42) and, as such, have missed out on the real character of human deeds or actions. Furthermore, certain groups are only studied in terms of being a “problem” (Du Bois 2003 [1898]). Du Bois’ inversion of the concept of social problems allows him to illustrate that the negative cultural position of black people in the United States is neither biological nor inherited, but reproduced by the active inhibition of the ability of the group to achieve its aims through economic exploitation, social isolation, violence, and oppression. More than this, this group bears witness to the manner in which capitalism was developing and extending its reach not only in the US but throughout the world. It is in this sense that “problems” and “groups” become central to Du Bois’ sociological vision and these will be taken up in more detail following a discussion of Double Consciousness.

### Double consciousness and sociological method

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (Du Bois 1997 [1904], 37)

This opening paragraph from *Souls of Black Folk’s* “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” sets out Du Bois’ autobiographical response to the “real” question, and a “real element” of society, namely – “How does it feel to be a problem?” His reply makes double consciousness a central concept for analysing the role of the concept of race and how it functions in “racial modernity” (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020, 15, 17). In Gooding-Williams’ formulation, “How does it feel to be a problem?” is the crucial question as it allows Du Bois to ask, “What sort of feeling generally characterizes the Negro experience of the condition of being a problem?” (Gooding-Williams 2009, 67).

Du Bois deploys the concepts of second sight, double consciousness and two-ness to connect his individual feeling of this experience to the broader experience of black people as a historical group.<sup>9</sup> The division within his experience, and that of other Black Americans, generates phenomenological conditions that allow black people to see the world as white people see it, and also to see themselves as white people see them (see Gooding-Williams 2009, 78). This produces a *double consciousness*, a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois 1997 [1904], 38). This sense of having a view of oneself through the perception of others is conditioned by racial prejudice; it enables self-consciousness, but one which is situated within the prejudiced view of black people in the epistemic and ontological perspectives of anti-black societies. In its alienated form, this double consciousness is characterized by a sense of “two-ness” a tug between thoughts, strivings, and ideals. This feeling contains two separate, but connected sensations. In this way, Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness indicates a

division in experience generated by an experience between (at least) two worlds, which the sociological work of Comte and Spencer obscure and ignore.

Double consciousness serves a theoretical role as a form of perception generated by a “human deed”, namely the creation of the “color line”. Double consciousness is the result of a sense of two-ness which relates to the history of the attempts of black people to be included, without full assimilation, into American society. The failures of reconstruction, which he discusses in terms of “Emancipation” (the abolition of slavery), “the ballot” (suffrage), and “book-learning” (education) (Du Bois 1997 [1904], 41, 42 and 42, respectively), were political failures, articulated as ideals in line with American values, but which went unrealized due to racial prejudice and material interest in maintaining black people as a subjugated population. Du Bois’ individual experience of these failures is a constitutive part of his existence as a member of a racial *group*, which is lost in traditional sociological analysis. Double consciousness, therefore, also serves a methodological function. As Du Bois puts it in his later text *Dusk of Dawn*: “The colored world therefore must be seen as existing not simply for itself but as a *group* whose insistent cry may yet become the warning which awakens the world to its truer self and its wider destiny” (Du Bois 1968 [1940], 172. *Emphasis added*). There are different worlds, and not just one society, which sociology studies, and these worlds emerge as a process of the formation of groups. Du Bois argues that one “world” can partake in the formation of another world. Just as the colonial creation of groups of black and white people leads to two hierarchically organized worlds, the black lifeworld has the capacity to “awaken the world” to a truer version of itself through an alteration of its strivings (deeds) and ideals. Double consciousness thus points to the existence of a double environment.

The role of “the environment” runs throughout Du Bois’ texts, not as a simple place or locale where things or deeds occur. Just as Du Bois is interested in the activity of grouping (group formation), of thinking (rather than just thoughts), he is interested in the *action* of the environment. This interest plays out in his portrayal of the division between worlds enacted within US American society by “Jim Crow”. Beyond the simple division between worlds of color alluded to in the above quotations, Du Bois focuses on the interaction of environments between *groups*, which are the material foundations of the experience of a racialized double environment. He writes,

Not only do white men but also colored men forget the facts of the Negro’s double environment. The Negro American has for his environment not only the white surrounding world, but also, and touching him usually much more nearly and compellingly, is the environment furnished by his own coloured group. (Du Bois 1968 [1940], 173)

This demonstrates that individuals not only experience a difference in proximity between group worlds; it also marks that the effects of one world, “the white world”, are such that they can short-circuit recognition of an individual’s proximity to their cultural group.

Du Bois seeks to account for the effects produced by the white world’s isolation of the black world from its own form of society and social experience. He shows how the white group is itself an incomplete and damaged aspect of the broader world within which the veil operates. It is in this sense that Du Bois talks of how the “*enviroming white group* distorts and frustrates itself even as it strives towards Justice” (Du Bois 1968 [1940], 153. *Emphasis added*). This interaction between worlds has two important implications for understanding Du Bois’ sociological project. First, Sociology’s hesitancy is a product of

the instability caused by its location in a “environing” white world, which abstracts itself from the deeds that have created and maintained it. An adequate analysis requires a focus on deeds to locate its problems in the organization of group life. Second, Du Bois’ turn to a processual, expressivist Sociology is motivated by the idea that a scientific Sociology must be augmented by attention to the forms of perception and the material conditions of the environed world, which is “gifted” to black people, and other colonized groups, through their position as environed by the white world. These two features of Du Bois’ project indicate the role of imagination in the production of Sociology; there is a need to produce a grounded sociology which generates images of the world that bridge a gap in experience generated by material and phenomenological distinctions in group life. The concern here is not simply a valorization of the standpoint of the oppressed or an inclusion of alternative epistemologies into hegemonic frameworks. Instead, Du Bois aims to reimagine sociology by manipulating its existing concepts, narratives, and norms. This active reimagining treats Sociology as a science in process, which draws from current understandings of “the social” in order to reorient them on both the scientific and everyday levels of experience. As will be seen in the discussion of problems and groups below, Du Bois’ imagination is an activity of epistemic transformation that tasks itself with shifting our sociological modes of thought. It resituates the notions of “problems” so that they can be addressed in their materiality through the activity of human deeds; it also uses the distinctions of group life to articulate new values in the production of a new world and new ideals.

## Problems and sociology

In his delineation of the “Sociological Imagination”, C. Wright Mills (2000 [1959]) talked of the need to challenge everyday assumptions and to relate “personal troubles to public issues” (Wright Mills 2000 [1959], 129–130, 181). This latter phrase has become, in some respects, emblematic of the remit and procedures of Sociology and it is, indeed, an important contribution, insofar as it highlights the links between individual experience and broader social conditions. Du Bois, likewise, was interested in the interrelations of individual experience and wider forces. However, his focus was not simply on “troubles” or “issues” but on how certain groups came to be seen as issues or troublesome, and how this related to individual experience. From this perspective, Du Bois problematizes the very concept of problems.

A social problem is the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life ... [it is] ever a relation between conditions and action, and as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group from time to time and from place to place, so social problems change, develop and grow. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 2)

Du Bois’ 1898 paper, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” argues for an intervention into the study of social problems to combat the conflation of scientific presuppositions with popular prejudice (Bright 2018). The address was originally given to the American Academy of Political and Social Science, which marks its status, like “Sociology Hesitant,” as an intervention in both theoretical and practical endeavors. Du Bois uses this analysis, simultaneously, as an introduction and justification for his large-scale sociological projects

that studied communities of black people on their own terms, both through his work in Philadelphia (Du Bois 2007 [1899])<sup>10</sup> and the larger project that he undertakes during his time at Atlanta University.<sup>11</sup> This work involves a (political) rethinking of the epistemic presuppositions of sociology, which pre-echoes some of his later thoughts on the status of sociology and its problematic relations to science and the production of knowledge: “whether or not this study may eventually lead to a systematic body of knowledge deserving the name of science, it cannot in any case fail to give the world a mass of truth worth the knowing” (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 1). The “mass of truth” that sociology has produced is not yet systematic despite its appeal to systematizing abstractions (for example in the work of Comte and Spencer, see, Du Bois 2000, 38–40). It is in the midst of this “mass of truth” that Du Bois produces his definition of a social problem, which aims to contribute an alternative imagining of social research that would ground a study of the deeds of humans in their rules, rhythm, and incalculability.

Du Bois’ seemingly straightforward definition of a social problem takes on a curious character when seen through the philosophical dimensions of his thought. On the level of politics, Gooding-Williams (2009, 58) again situates this definition in terms of the “ethical” understanding of political economy” developed by Gustav Schmoller, Du Bois’ principal professor in Berlin. On this view, social practices should be measured in terms of “collectively shared and historically formed ethical consciousness (*Sittlichkeit*)” (Gooding-Williams 2009, 58). To study a social problem is to identify the concrete processes that inhibit a society from acting in accord with its shared ideals.<sup>12</sup> Such a concept takes on new light and importance when deployed within the specific interrelations of capitalism and race developing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century US. Rather than conducting a study of a racial population in terms of pathologized racial difference, Du Bois, turns to the “social world,” meaning that the “Negro Problem” lies within the pathologies of the society they inhabit. By focusing on the social, Gordon writes, “Du Bois has, in one sweep, taken the US discourse on blackness onto unfamiliar ground” (2000, 70). Furthermore, by delineating black people as a specific group defined by and situated within a wider problematic, Du Bois shifts the foundation of study from racist assumptions to a historical foundation (Gordon 2000, 71). This intervention into the epistemological foundations of sociology is also an intervention into its ontological presuppositions regarding blackness. Du Bois shifts the narrative to that of the history of “Negro Problems,” which presents these problems as the result of the weaving of racist distinctions into the various levels of society. Thus, he writes:

Consequently, though we ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question [...] this problem, like others, has had a long historical development, has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover, that it is not one problem, but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex; and these problems have their one bond of unity in the *act* that they group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave-trading brought into the land. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 3, emphasis added)

Du Bois shows how the problems facing Black people in the United States result from the impacts of the legacy of slavery, economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and societal marginalization. They are evidence of the United States’ failures to act in accord with its own ideals. They are environmental problems resulting from the actions of an

enviroming world on a subjugated population. Furthermore, as Chandler (2025) has demonstrated, these questions are not simply “local” questions concerning the history and politics of the US. Du Bois’ investigations of the formation of racial groups amid specific conditions of the labor supply, slavery, and nation-building are exemplary of the uneven development of modernity. The history of how different (racialized) social groups are constituted amid the weave of labor conditions that are deeply implicated in, and productive of, the historical, political and “real” possibilities matters not only for these groups but for societies, nations, indeed, the world as a whole. “Du Bois proposes that the proscription of the Negro is costly to all concerned: to the Negro, first of all, but also to America and to the world as a whole” (Chandler 2025, 19).

Du Bois offers a reimagined historical narrative of “Negro Problems” as a racial project (Omi and Winant 2014) in which the concept of race unfolds at the intersection of race and economics, “interracial relationships”,<sup>13</sup> and the historical experience of black people in the United States. Du Bois reimagines a supposedly straightforward history as a story of societal decline. Importantly, this involves an active reimagining of the “Negro problem” as the history of a “plexus of social problems” that “group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave-trading brought into the land” (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 3). The movement from the singular to the plural along with the phrase “group themselves about” shifts the interpretive frame to an examination of the deeds undertaken to produce and exclude black people as full members of the US. This mention of groups and grouping returns the discussion to Du Bois’ critique of Comte (and Sociology) where such notions were taken as both fixed and yet also abstract. Du Bois cannot afford the luxury of unsituated abstractions. His discussion of groups involves specific groups that come to be at specific times, in specific places that generate, and are subject to, networks of deeds. These are the “real elements of society” and should be the main concern of Sociology, as they draw attention to the historicity, contingency, rules and rhythm of the constitution of societies. While these historically contingent factors can explain the development of racial divisions and help identify the apparent rules that they generate, the inverse also applies. This contingency invokes the role of imagination. Things could have been otherwise, things could still be otherwise; but both require active imaginings in the face of a complex of sedimented power relations. For, insofar as the dominating rule is that of race prejudice, these historical and contingent features operate as if they were a necessity, as will be explained further in the following discussion of “groups.”

## Groups

In “The Study of the Negro Problems,” Du Bois (2003 [1898]) seeks to trace the rules and rhythm of the process in the United States through which slavery and, more particularly, the enslaving of particular groups of people came to be seen as, if not inevitable, then as “common sense” or “normal.” Du Bois wants to point to the contingency, the historical unlikeliness, that constitute the “real elements” of a US society based on slavery. This involves tracing the thorny paths through which enslavement became linked to questions about “colour”. This process and these real elements both produce and reinforce the eminently *racist* idea through which slavery (in the US) is attached to blackness. In doing so, these manoeuvres and machinations themselves helped produce a specific view and

experience of both race and racism. That is to say, what is considered both race and racism was both an input and an outcome of the linking of enslavement to a specific group which, in itself, helped produce this group *as a group*. As Chandler (2025, 32) puts it:

the concept of race is at once the epitome of such supposed categorical distinction and only an instance of kind – one kind of the larger problematization of such ideas and practices that Du Bois formulates under the heading “the problem of the color line”.

Du Bois makes it clear, however, that the immediate “problem” which led to this particular and peculiar intertwining of color and enslavement was an economic one, in that it was a question of labor supply which led to the “modern” US conceptualization of race:

In the latter part of the seventeenth and early in the eighteenth centuries, the central and all-absorbing economic need of America was the creation of a proper labor supply to develop American wealth [...] statutes sought to solve problems of labor and not of race or color. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 3)

It was only later, between 1750 and 1800, that links began to be made between what Du Bois terms a “social caste” and the development of a “systematic slave code”. This marks a step-change in what can now be understood as the racial project of modernity and modernity as racial.<sup>14</sup>

The explicit association of race and slave status was encoded in law and immersed in developing social conditions which thereby defined the genesis of slavery in the US:

these circumstances were the economic superiority of the slave system, and the fact that the slaves were neither of the same race, language nor religion as the servants and their masters. In laboring classes thus widely separated there *naturally arose* a difference in legal and social standing. Colonial statutes soon ceased to embrace the regulations applying to slaves and servants in one chapter, and laws were passed for servants on the one hand and for Negro slaves on the other. Even, as this slave code was developing, new *social conditions* changed the aspect of the problems. The laws hitherto had been made to fit a class distinguished by its condition more than by its race or color. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 3-4. Emphases added)

The societal conditions underpinning the slave trade are transformed into a distinction maintained on the level of economics; a distinction between “slaves for life” and “servants for a limited period” (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 3) which codified racial difference in terms of a contractual relationship.<sup>15</sup> Once this distinction is established, other distinctions of social castes “naturally arose” through the separate laws produced for each group. Du Bois’ use of “naturally” is ironic, for these distinctions are produced by specific and contingent *social* conditions. Nevertheless, once established these distinctions and differences are taken to be *natural* insofar as they take on the appearance of inevitability. This is a key step in establishing race as powerful, but real and operative fiction which presumes the distinctions that it asserts as natural even while activating the process of “social construction”. Du Bois’ double language here identifies and utilizes the duplicitous nature of such racist “fictions” (see Thomas 2025, 74). This function of racial differentiation facilitates the production of “races” in terms of what Taylor (2013, 117) calls “probabilistically defined populations” created by “connecting certain bodies and bloodlines to certain social locations and modes of treatment”. It is also a powerful reminder of the need to be careful when using phrases such as “socially produced” or “socially constructed”. Du Bois’ retelling of the processes of enslavement in the US invites us to *reimagine* the

past in order to better understand the present. This involves matters of law, legal codes, attitudes, economics, “history” but also murder and enslavement incorporating material realities that involve ships, chains, warehouses, plantations and more. To reduce such events to “simply” matters of social construction is to misunderstand what happened, and the deeds involved. Du Bois’ reimagining aims to alter the image of the past by providing the deeds and structures that produce its relations. It concretizes sociological abstractions so that attention is paid the specific details at work in the “social”. Du Bois is interested in how the “social order” generates racialized experiential and environmental conditions.<sup>16</sup> The foundations for these conditions are generated by a further distinction between groups in reaction to the development of black group life.

There arose now [...] a class of English-speaking Negroes born on American soil, and members of Christian churches; [...] there was also created by emancipation and the birth of black sons of white women a new class of free Negroes: all these developments led to a distinct beginning of *group* life among Negroes. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 4. Emphasis added)

The emergence of free, US-born Black people both problematizes the criteria of racial division and illustrates the permeability of racial boundaries. The very specific matter of the status of those enslaved people born in the US and adhering to Christianity

brought the colonists face to face with new and serious problems; which they sought at first to settle in curious ways, denying the rite of baptism, establishing the legal presumption that all Negroes and mulattoes were slaves, and finally changing the Slave Code into a Black Code, replacing a caste of condition by a caste of race. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 4)

Du Bois’ reading again inverts the usual narrative approach and draws attention to the use of laws to generate and naturalize social divisions and their conditioned effects. In addition, he traces how this division is naturalized through appeals to the relationship between blackness and plantation slavery. As Du Bois puts it in a later text:

Men came to the idea of exclusive black slavery by gradually enslaving the workers [...] all this until the caste of color was so turned as to correspond with the caste of work *and enslave not only slaves but black men who were not slaves*. (Du Bois 1909, 142–143. Emphasis added)

Du Bois reveals how the institution of slavery within modernity is not a simple historical fact; it was and is a composite entity which needed to be produced and reproduced. The attempts to elide race and slavery have a very specific history, legacy and vocabulary. For, slavery “has a whole vocabulary of its own: the strong races, superior peoples, race preservation, the struggle for survival and a peculiar use of the word ‘white’” (Du Bois 1909, 153–154). It is in the face of such a history, vocabulary and set of assumptions about the proper mode and operation of Sociology that Du Bois sets out on his intellectual and political task. As has been seen, he insists upon an analysis of the real elements of the specific groupings constituted by the practices of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that have been either ignored or reduced to constituting solely a “social problem”. In the face of such complacency, Du Bois demands more detail, more knowledge:

we should seek to know and measure carefully all the forces and conditions that go to make up these different problems, to trace the historical development of these conditions, and discover as far as possible the probable trend of further development. (Du Bois 2003 [1898], 10)

This connects to the principle that Du Bois sets out in “Sociology Hesitant” (Du Bois 2000) that the reality of groups is not an abstraction, and this is key to a sociological understanding. History needs an active reimagining and rewriting in relation to the contingencies within which modernity has been formed. It is in these terms that Chandler (2025, 31) characterizes the question that Du Bois is asking as follows: “What will be the tendentious future of new forms of relation between social and historical human groups in the time to come, the future, in this so-called modern era?” (Chandler 2025, 31).

## Conclusion

Du Bois’ imaginative recasting of the history of racial division in the United States demonstrates the importance of a sociology that takes human deeds seriously; tracing them to identify the rules and rhythm of the formation of societies through the contingent activities of group life. This shift allows Du Bois to avoid the static abstractions that naturalize societal relations into ontologically rigid divisions. Du Bois’ situation as a Black US American is crucial, as he is positioned to see the structure of envioning worlds as a condition of his work and survival. He cannot afford to live as an abstraction.

Du Bois’ use of imagination recasts the history of racial division into a narrative that identifies the mechanisms through which racial hierarchies are generated and maintained in economic, legal, and socio-cultural structures. His (re-)constructivist history of race is a process of reimagining that takes history and the lived experience of blackness as a starting point for treating race as a categorical distinction between groups, which is naturalized in these relational structures and justified through racial fictions that pervade a racist society and may also be mirrored within Sociology. For Du Bois, the discipline of Sociology suffers from forms of abstraction consistent with the white world’s abstraction from the deeds, and therefore lives, of the groups that it has organized for exploitation and extraction. The hesitancy in Sociology is akin to the “feelings of delicacy” and “inability to properly frame the question” experienced by Du Bois’ interlocutors in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”. They mark a problematic relationship that maintains itself in the sense that a problem is present, but not addressable, because the presence of the problem is crucial to the self-understanding of the scientist, as well as those audiences who can treat Ota Benga’s racial performance as a social fact. Du Bois’ sociological imagination works directly on the problems in their broader environmental context. The “negro problem” is not a problem for black people; it is the result of a global problem, the “problem of the color line.” This shift moves beyond simply working against white supremacist prejudices to a view where the problems created by an institutionally generated division between forms of life based on racist distinctions produces groups that always stand in problematic relationships with one another. This, perhaps, is the ultimate problem of the color line.

## Notes

1. We have capitalized the word “Sociology” to point to the peculiar and particular institution of Sociology which we have inherited. It is a formation which could have been different and which, we want to argue, could still be different. In this sense, Sociology requires the designation of a proper name. A second reason is that Du Bois often uses capitals for nouns such as “Sociology”, “Deeds” and other nominalized abstractions.

2. Although there are, of course, exceptions to this limiting or universalizing approach. See, for example, Latimer and Skeggs (2011).
3. We follow Du Bois and keep the word “black” lower cased when used as an adjective which acts as a modifier for a term, and upper cased when used to refer to particular groups or people, e.g. Black Americans.
4. Unlike Du Bois, Weber was invited to give a talk at the conference. Indeed, Du Bois and Weber met and discussed possible publications (see Chandler 2025).
5. Gooding-Williams (2009) falls into a similar analysis of Du Bois’ race concept as he raises the proposition of opting out of racial identity as a possible feature of Du Bois’ definition. Du Bois’ active conception, grounded in deeds, along with his experience of how racial identities and attributes are attributed would run contrary to this idea outside of cases of “passing,” which he may have in mind, but would be exceptions to his treatment of races as groups developed and evolving through collective action.
6. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer who, in a comment on an earlier draft of this piece, highlighted this aspect of Du Bois’ thought and its possible contribution to our argument.
7. The original text has “unintelligent” which could be a mistaken rendition of “unintelligible” but it is not possible to be certain of this.
8. “What then is the future path open before Sociology? It must seek a working hypothesis which will include Sociology and Physics. To do this it must be provisionally assumed that this is a world of Law and Chance” (Du Bois 2015, 43).
9. In his later, more autobiographical texts, *Dusk of Dawn* (Du Bois 1968 [1940]) and *Darkwater* (2003 [1920]), Du Bois continues this move of using his experience as the starting point for a broader analysis of race which shifts along with his research. Through this process, his reflections on his own experiences expand along with his conceptions of the operations of “race” in modernity.
10. See also, Gordon (2000, 66–69; Outlaw 2000, 282–285).
11. For a fuller argument as to how Du Bois set up the first department of Sociology in any university in the US, see the chapter by Morris (2015, 55–99) “The Du Bois-Atlanta School of Sociology”.
12. This anticipates the shared strivings that Du Bois outlines in *Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois 1997 [1904]) and the shared characters of races that he discusses in his 1897 paper on “The Conservation of Races”.
13. We have used the slightly awkward phrase “interracial relationships” instead of that of “race relations,” because of how oddly loaded the latter term is. We are using the former phrase to refer to the sections in Du Bois’ (2003 [1898]) “The Study of the Negro Problems” where he talks about the conditions of shared life between races: intermarriage, children of masters/mistresses and enslaved people, segregation as a caste system.
14. The importance of Du Bois for an understanding of the centrality of race to modernity has been a cornerstone of the work of Paul Gilroy (1993; 2005) whose ideas permeate the discussions which follow.
15. Du Bois’ framing anticipates the distinction between the Social Contract and Racial Contract later theorized by Charles Mills (2022), which embeds white supremacist hierarchy in systems of abstract equality.
16. It is also painfully ironic that, as Morris points out (2015, 112–118) the much lauded narrative of the Chicago School as “inventing” US Sociology not only ignores the prior contribution of Du Bois but also papers over the assumptions of racial hierarchy that Robert Park promulgated at Chicago, and instituted at the core of Sociology.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the University of Essex.

## ORCID

Michael Halewood  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5122-3990>

## References

- Bright, Liam Kofi. 2018. "Du Bois' democratic defence of the value free ideal." *Synthese* 195 (5): 2227–2245.
- Chandler, N. D. 2025. *The Possible Form of an Interlocution. W. E. B. Du Bois and Max Weber in Correspondence*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1909. "Evolution of the Race Problem." *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference (New York: 1909, May 31 and June 1)*, 142–158. [https://librarycollections.law.umn.edu/documents/darrow/Proceedings%20of%20the%20National%20Negro%20Conference%201909\\_%20New%20York\\_%20May%2031%20and%20June\\_1.pdf](https://librarycollections.law.umn.edu/documents/darrow/Proceedings%20of%20the%20National%20Negro%20Conference%201909_%20New%20York_%20May%2031%20and%20June_1.pdf).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1968 [1940]. *Dusk of Dawn. An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1997 [1904]. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Boston: Bedford Books.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2000 [1905]. "Sociology Hesitant." *boundary 2* 27 (3): 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-27-3-37>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2003 [1898]. "The Study of the Negro Problems." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (1): 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271620056800103>
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2003 [1920]. *Darkwater*. Amherst: Humanity Books.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2004 [1897]. *The Conservation of Races. The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers* (2). Project Gutenberg.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2007 [1899]. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic*. London: Verso.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2005. "Race Ends Here." In *The Body Reader*, edited by M. Fraser and M. Greco, 251–255. London: Routledge.
- Gooding-Williams, Robert. 2009. *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. New York: Cambridge UP.
- Gordon, Lewis R. 2000. *Existentialia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Itzigsohn, J., and K. Brown. 2020. *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: Racialized Modernity and the Global Color Line*. New York: NYU Press.
- Latimer, J., and B. Skeggs. 2011. "The Politics of Imagination: Keeping Open and Critical." *The Sociological Review* 59 (3): 393–410. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02024.x>
- Mills, Charles W. 2022. *The Racial Contract. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Morris, Aldon. 2015. *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Newkirk, P. 2015. *Spectacle. The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga*. New York: Amistad.
- Omi, M., and H. Winant. 2014. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Outlaw, Lucius T. 2000. "W.E.B. Du Bois on the Study of Social Problems." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (1): 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271620056800120>
- Rabaka, Rabina. 2010. *Against Epistemic Apartheid: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Disciplinary Decadence of Sociology*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Taylor, Paul C. 2013. *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Thomas, M. 2025. "Race and Reality: Towards a Social Aesthetics of Race." In *More-than-Human Aesthetics. Venturing beyond the Bifurcation of Nature*, edited by M. Sehgal and A. Wilkie, 71–88. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Wright Mills, C. 2000 [1959]. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.