

## Introduction: On W. E. B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking

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The idea for this special issue of *boundary 2* has a complicated genealogy. Its beginnings go back to the summer of 1985, when I had been asked by Harold Bloom to contribute an original essay for the *Ralph Ellison* volume of his Modern Critical Views series. I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota at the time and had just met Henry Louis Gates Jr. at the *Cultural Critique* conference in Berkeley, California, on minority discourse. It was Skip to whom I was indebted for the opportunity extended by Bloom, which I botched. That failure, however, was the occasion for the beginning of the idea for this issue of *boundary 2*.

I had begun to write a piece on the theory of language entailed in Ellison's understanding of the blues as an ironic practice of signification in which experience has no categorical foundation. In particular, I was trying to think about how the Negro, ever lurking in *Invisible Man*, and boldly delineated in Ellison's *Shadow and Act* essays, figured in his theory of the blues. Did it figure in as the agency of signifying practice, or as a function of the practice, the origin of whose agency was indeterminate? Pursuing the his-

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tory of this question brought me, in due course, to the theoretical writings of W. E. B. Du Bois. The reasons for this are very direct. I had already begun, for my own purposes, an inquiry about the history of the Negro as a figure, with the principal postulate that while hardly anyone wants to be a Negro anymore, even fewer know what it is they think themselves to not be. The predominant attitude of our time—"I know what I am, but I do not know what I reject"—strikes me as a perversion of the insight Montaigne deployed in contradiction to the then emerging anthropological habit. That inquiry had already prompted me to begin as systematic a study as possible of the writings of Du Bois on this question. It was in the course of this that "Sociology Hesitant" came to my attention, first in Francis Broderick's essay published in the *Phylon Quarterly* in 1958, entitled "German Influences on the Scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois," and then in his book.<sup>1</sup> After that, I found reference to it in Dan Green and Edwin Driver's collection of Du Bois's theoretical writings on sociology, *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, the introduction of which is a reworking of their 1979 *Phylon* essay, "W. E. B. Du Bois: A Case in the Sociology of Sociological Negation."<sup>2</sup> Both of the Green and Driver references were elaborations on Broderick's 1958 essay and his unpublished notes on "Sociology Hesitant." The impression they leave is that this important essay is no longer accessible.

I was quite surprised, then, when, in the course of my project of gradually reading through the microfilm of the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, I discovered "Sociology Hesitant" cataloged. The significance of this I will take up in a moment. At that time, it was with some excitement, tinged with a bit of incredulity, that I contacted the Special Collections and Archives section of the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries and requested an official copy of the essay. It arrived within a week. What I read so directly addressed the theoretical problematic of concern to me about the relationship between the figure of the Negro and epistemology, providing a key to the many vexing

1. See Francis L. Broderick, "German Influences on the Scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Phylon Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (December 1958): 367-71. See also Francis L. Broderick, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1959).

2. See Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, introduction to *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). See also Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, "W. E. B. Du Bois: A Case in the Sociology of Sociological Negation," *Phylon Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (December 1979): 312.

fits and starts and seeming contradictions about this issue in the corpus of Du Bois's work, that I became engrossed in fitting together the pieces. This resulted in a lengthy, and somewhat incoherent, essay on the problem of nescience and ethics in Du Bois's work, entitled "Alethiology in Althamaha." Unfortunately, it was not what Bloom had commissioned, so understandably there was no response to it at all.

Other events overtook me, and the episode was nearly forgotten. The work on the Negro postulate and Du Bois continued throughout, however, yielding some publications and scholarly papers. It was the event of one such paper at Dartmouth College in 1995 that brought me into contact with Nahum Dimitri Chandler, who was at Duke University at the time. Nahum's invitation to present my work at his W. E. B. Du Bois Lecture Series in 1996 led to my becoming associated with the impressive group of minds collected here. That same year, Kevin Miles brought together one of the most comprehensive collections of Du Bois scholars to Villanova University, including most of the contributors in this issue, all of whom had been laboring for varying periods of time with Du Bois's philosophical thought. It was there that the idea of something like this collection was hatched. As occurs all too frequently with such projects, time passed and it teetered on the brink of extinction. It was due to the encouragement and keen interest of my colleagues on the *boundary 2* editorial collective, particularly Paul Bové, that it was revitalized in the spring of 1999. In March of that year, Nahum and Kevin organized a Du Bois event—this time in Münster, Germany, under the auspices of the European Collegium for African American Research—where I read the version of an essay about "Sociology Hesitant" that forms the basis for this introduction. The energy of the gathered minds and the nature of the work made that Münster occasion the suitable moment to suggest collecting the papers presented there into a volume centered around "Sociology Hesitant," and to then propose it to the editorial collective of *boundary 2* as a special issue. After the editorial collective gave its approval for the initial idea, I solicited pieces from scholars beyond the Münster group, whose work was related to each of the fields addressed by Du Bois's essay in order to make more pronounced its significance as an experiment in the theory and organization of knowledge. The issue you are now holding is the fruit of that effort.

The essays gathered here span a wide array of disciplines, from German studies and sociology, to literary criticism, philosophy, and anthropology. The organizing principle of the collection is an extended engagement with the ideas and projects formulated by Du Bois in a series of essays

and papers he wrote between 1887 and 1910, taking up complicated and difficult questions concerning the nature of scientific methodology and the theory of knowledge. Collectively, the contributions reflect a new and distinctively rigorous engagement with Du Bois's theoretical and philosophical thought, drawing our attention to the ways in which Du Bois's thinking about the "Negro problem" was an explicit effort to think about the problematic of historical agency in a manner that is still of consequence for most of those fields constituting the social sciences and the humanities—which, combined, are often referred to as the human sciences. The engagement of Du Bois's thinking along these lines has a relevance for current situations, demonstrating that truly engaging the Negro question requires rethinking the historical nature of theoretical understanding, recalling for us that the struggle for equality is a struggle for freedom of thought in pursuit of truth.

Because the focal point of that engagement is Du Bois's complicated and often referenced, theoretically crucial essay, "Sociology Hesitant," it is being published here for the first time. The history of this essay's fate warrants at least a brief recounting. Among the earliest references to it is by Broderick in the already mentioned 1958 *Phylon* essay. He cites "Sociology Hesitant" as a prime example of the profound influence that the German school of historical economics—particularly his German dissertation director, Gustav von Schmoller—had on Du Bois's theory of sociology. To elaborate this claim, Broderick paraphrases segments of the essay in which Du Bois critiques Spencerian positivism for "verbal jugglery" that "ultimately led to enigmatic abstractions" enabling theoreticians such as Herbert Spencer to avoid "real men and real things" and concentrate "on a 'mystical' whole full of 'metaphysical lay figures' which corresponded to their theories but bore little relation to observable fact."<sup>3</sup> Finding a resemblance between this critique and Schmoller's rejection of the deductive method of such Manchester school economists as John Stuart Mill,<sup>4</sup> Broderick sums

3. Broderick, "German Influences," 369.

4. The Manchester school reference is to the body of politicians, so designated by Disraeli, who were led by Richard Cobden. In his effort to repeal the Corn Laws, Cobden formed the Anti-Corn Laws League, which held its meetings at Manchester and advocated the principles of free trade. The phrase "Manchester policy" came subsequently to derisively designate a policy of laissez-faire economics and self-interest. The policy of laissez-faire was predicated on the assumption in classical economics of a natural economic order as support for the conviction of economists such as David Ricardo and James Mill that economic growth stemmed from unregulated individual activity. John Stuart Mill was responsible for bringing this philosophy into popular economic usage in his *Principles of Political*

up the significance of “Sociology Hesitant” for Du Bois’s thinking as an index of a star pupil’s application of his teacher’s “new ideas.”<sup>5</sup> The essay is at once presented and dismissed as further evidence of Du Bois extending rather than revising Schmoller’s historicism.<sup>6</sup> This judgment of the essay’s significance is not substantially modified in Broderick’s subsequent 1959 biography of Du Bois, although he reports it to be an important piece of writing for understanding Du Bois’s theoretical development.<sup>7</sup> Broderick’s reading became the dominant portrayal of “Sociology Hesitant,” which remained unpublished.

Arnold Rampersad, in his extraordinarily thoughtful and thoroughly researched book on Du Bois’s thinking, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, makes use of Broderick’s 1958 article, elaborating even more carefully the apparent relationship between Schmoller’s displacing deductive for inductive method and Du Bois’s own commitment to such methodology as a means toward social reform.<sup>8</sup> Rampersad, however, echoes Broderick’s judgment that the elements of Du Bois’s theory were applications of Schmoller’s.<sup>9</sup> Little significant attention is paid to the essay after that, however. That neglect may very well have come about as a consequence of general acceptance of Broderick’s portrayal of it as being intellectually derivative, and this undoubtedly contributed to its being commonly regarded as lost.

The portrayal persisted in the scholarship on Du Bois’s theoretical

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*Economy* (1848), in which he set forth the arguments for and against government activity in economic affairs. A point of significance to our consideration of Du Bois’s critique of Comte’s positivism and his sharing in Schmoller’s rejection of the Manchester school’s deductive method is the fact that John Stuart Mill was an admirer of Comte’s early work in positivism—although he was severely critical of Comte’s later turn to religion—and provided Comte with financial support after he lost his post as an examiner at the École Polytechnique in 1842. This support and admiration was related to Mill’s own work in logic, in which he had taken men’s experience of the uniformity of nature as the warrant of induction in order to ground the judgment that applying the principle of causation and the methods of physical science to moral and social phenomena would yield “conditional predictions” that were understandable as “social laws.” In this way, Mill and Comte and Mill agreed on the possibility of a true social science.

5. Broderick, “German Influences,” 369.

6. Broderick, “German Influences,” 369.

7. Broderick, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis*, 23.

8. Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 43–45.

9. Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of Du Bois*, 44.

work after Rampersad. Elliot Rudwick is silent on it, as is Joseph De Marco.<sup>10</sup> Even Green and Driver, in the introduction to their exemplary collection of Du Bois's sociological essays, restrict their engagement with "Sociology Hesitant" to a perfunctory quotation taken from Broderick's research notes.<sup>11</sup> They do, however, provide a slightly more engaging gloss in their 1979 *Phylon* essay.<sup>12</sup> So thorough is the negligence to read "Sociology Hesitant" that David Levering Lewis, in the first volume of his definitive biography, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race*, claims the essay to be now lost and quotes extensively from the notes Broderick used in writing his assessment of it.<sup>13</sup> These notes are a bit more extensive than Broderick's 1958 and 1959 publications, giving a sense of the direction of Du Bois's thinking about action, but they are presented as a promise not quite realized and now beyond our reach. More recently, Shamoan Zamir has made some interesting and insightful speculations about the significance of "Sociology Hesitant," remarking that it is an attempt on Du Bois's part "to synthesize the rival claims of voluntarism and determinism, or idealism and positivism."<sup>14</sup> These insights, however, appear to be based on no more than Zamir's study of Green and Driver's 1979 *Phylon* essay. As late as 1995, then, Du Bois's essay "Sociology Hesitant" remained unread and presumed lost.

In point of fact, "Sociology Hesitant" is still extant and cataloged in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers in the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries as an unpublished manuscript. There is a handwritten parenthetical note that reads: "(c 1909?)." There has been, in addition to the dismissal of "Sociology Hesitant," some confusion over just when it was composed. Broderick places it sometime between 1900 and 1903, as does Lewis. This confusion is a consequence of the very neglectful reading of the essay that has contributed to its obscurity. Once the essay is read—that is, immediately on beginning to actually read it—its date is unquestionable. That date

10. See Elliot M. Rudwick, *W. E. B. Du Bois, Voice of the Black Protest Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); and Joseph P. De Marco, *The Social Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983).

11. Green and Driver, eds. *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, 33. For the notes they quote from, see Francis L. Broderick, W. E. B. Du Bois Research Material, Box 3, M6 197, Schomburg Research Center, New York Public Library.

12. Green and Driver, "W. E. B. Du Bois: A Case in the Sociology of Sociological Negation," 312.

13. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 202–3.

14. Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 72–73.

is 1905, more precisely sometime after February 1905. This is quite clear from the opening paragraph of the essay, which reads:

The Congress of Arts and Sciences at St. Louis last summer served to emphasize painfully the present plight of Sociology; for the devotee of the cult made the strange discovery that the further following of his bent threatened violent personal dismemberment. His objects of interest were distributed quite impartially under some six of the seven grand divisions of Science: economics, here; ethnology, there; a thing called "Sociology" hidden under Mental Science, and the things really sociological ranged in a rag-bag and labeled "Social Regulation." And so on.<sup>15</sup>

The very first sentence of this paragraph provides a clear sign of the composition date of "Sociology Hesitant." The Congress of Arts and Science to which Du Bois refers was the organization of intellectual conferences planned and convened in conjunction with the 1904 Saint Louis Exposition, otherwise known as the Universal Exposition, Saint Louis, or the Louisiana Exposition. This was the 1904 World's Fair, hosted by the United States in Saint Louis, Missouri, that summer to commemorate the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase, which established the largest portion of the geographical landmass of the United States, and to commemorate the ascendancy of the United States as a leading industrial and capital power. In the introduction to volume 1 of the published proceedings of the congress, *Congress of Arts and Science, Universal Exposition, Saint Louis 1904*, the director of the congress, Howard J. Rogers, proclaims, "The Exposition and the Congress are correlative terms. The former concentrates the visible products of the brain and hand of man; the Congress is the literary embodiment of its activities."<sup>16</sup>

Edited by Rogers, the proceedings were published by Hugh Mifflin and Company in eight volumes, beginning with volume 1 in the spring of 1905 and ending with volume 8 in 1907. Du Bois's observation that sociology failed to find its proper place in the divisions of the sciences speaks directly to the intellectual agenda of the 1904 event. According to Rogers's introduction to the proceedings, the idea of a series of international congresses

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant," published in this special issue of *boundary 2* (37–44). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as SH.

16. International Congress of Arts and Science, *Congress of Arts and Science, Universal Exposition, Saint Louis 1904*, ed. Howard J. Rogers, 8 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905–07), 1:1.

was developed at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Even though the prior expositions of Paris in 1878, Philadelphia in 1876, and Vienna in 1873 all held under their auspices many conferences and congresses, all of these meetings were unrelated and at times almost accidental in their organization in spite of their scientific interest and value. This long tradition of disjunction and confusion persisted in spite of the fact that the germ of the congress idea “may be said to have been the establishment of the International Scientific Commission in connection with the Paris Exposition of 1867.”<sup>17</sup>

There were seventy congresses attached to the 1889 Paris Exposition. Their success led the authorities of the 1893 Colombian Exposition to establish the World’s Congress Auxiliary, designed to “supplement the exhibit of material progress by the Exposition, by portrayal of the wonderful achievements of the new age in science, literature, education, government, jurisprudence, morals, charity, religion, and other departments of human activity, as the most effective means of increasing the fraternity, progress, prosperity, and peace of mankind.”<sup>18</sup> Although the 1900 Paris Exposition perfected the organization of the concurrent-series type of congress, there was a serious problem of low attendance at the majority of the congresses, to the extent that in many of them scarcely anyone attended besides the specialists presenting their work. This difficulty was of particular concern to the 1904 Saint Louis Exposition planners, because Saint Louis was so far from both coasts and from any significant centers of university learning and research. Paris, after all, was not only a major center of learning, research, and capital, but at the hub of a vast network of such centers, and yet attendance at the congress there was extremely poor. How could anything different be expected in Saint Louis, which, although the original capital of the Louisiana territory and an emerging industrial center, was still a fairly provincial town, far removed from the important American centers of learning and commerce? The planner’s way of dealing with this anticipated problem was to conceive a plan for the overall Exposition, in which the thematic idea of the congress was that of the Exposition as a whole. As Rogers puts it:

No Exposition was ever better fitted to serve as the groundwork of a Congress of ideas than Saint Louis. The ideal of the Exposition, which was created in time and fixed in place to commemorate a great historical event [the Louisiana Purchase], was its educational influence. Its appeal to the citizens of the United States for support, to

17. Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science*, 1:2.

18. Cited in Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science*, 1:2.

the Federal Congress for appropriation, and to foreign governments for cooperation, was primarily on this basis.<sup>19</sup>

For the first time in the history of Expositions, the educational influence was made the dominant factor, and the classification and installation of exhibits were made in relation to that principle. The specific principle, or theme, devised for the Saint Louis Exposition was to celebrate the convergence of science, commerce, and industry that Saint Louis embodied as an exemplary new American city, while also celebrating America's ascendancy as a world power. The principal question was, "How have the sciences developed themselves since the days of the Louisiana Purchase?" Accordingly, the main purpose of the Exposition was understood to be to place within reach of the individual investigator "the objective thought of the world, so classified as to show the relations to all similar phases of human endeavor, and so arranged as to be practically available for reference and study."<sup>20</sup> As a part of the organic scheme, a congress plan was contemplated that would be correlative with the exhibit features of the Exposition, and whose published proceedings would stand as a monument to the breadth and enterprise of the Exposition long after its buildings had disappeared and its commercial achievements had grown dim in the minds of men.<sup>21</sup> The plan was arrived at with the help of those deemed to be the foremost experts in all fields of knowledge.

The official list of those consulted is long, and Du Bois was not among them, although many who were ill-disposed to him were, including Franklin Giddings of Columbia University and George Vincent of the University of Chicago. I have yet to find any indication in Du Bois's correspondence from the period 1903–1904, or in his papers collected at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, that he was ever consulted in any capacity about the conceptualization of the congress plan or otherwise made privy of the program from any but public sources. Nor is there a clear sense that he attended the 1904 Saint Louis Exposition. Although he did attend the 1900 Paris Exposition. In all likelihood, then, his correct understanding of the principle of the congress came from having carefully read the published proceedings, which means that he would not have been able to have done so until sometime in the spring of 1905 at the earliest.

By its date, Du Bois's "Sociology Hesitant" belongs to the first group

19. Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science*, 1:3.

20. Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science*, 1:3.

21. Rogers, ed., *Congress of Arts and Science*, 1:3.

of writings following *The Souls of Black Folk*. By its themes—particularly the extent to which sociology’s dispersal across fields stemmed from epistemological fallacy—“Sociology Hesitant” is so obviously still deeply rooted in the earlier scientific writings surrounding the Atlanta Conferences that it runs the risk of its affinity to *Souls*, and with that its originality, not being immediately apprehensible. The relationship between time and thinking has long been the bias along which the tensions—generally understood as outright contradictions and abandonment of lines of thought—of Du Bois’s work have been resolved. The apparent difference of style and thought between *Souls* and his early historiographic, sociological, and theoretical writings has been accounted for as indicating the abandoning of the abstractions of science for direct social engagement through propaganda. It has even been argued—and this is an argument that finds footing in Du Bois’s own assertions on the matter—that the discrimination is one of pragmatic psychology for metaphysics. The discrimination is neatly made. The enormity of the risk is evidenced in David Levering Lewis’s claiming that these meditations have been lost for sometime now. Nevertheless, the essay is there where it has always been, in the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. Given the general accessibility of the typewritten nine-page manuscript, perhaps, and this seems a reasonable judgment, what has been lost thus far is the situation of the text. That is to say, what has remained lost until now is the meaning of what Du Bois is thinking in “Sociology Hesitant.”

This is a challenge, true. But the challenge is not to correct prior claims and such. The challenge is to think with Du Bois; and in “Sociology Hesitant,” his thinking is concerned with the truth. It would be far too quick and simple to assert that Broderick misread “Sociology Hesitant” because he could not understand its challenge, and that misreading displaced the text as a sort of solution to what eventually appeared as an aporia. This is so, perhaps, but the why for of it is a bit more complicated. Exploring the complication of the aporetic in “Sociology Hesitant” is what the balance of this introduction is about.

### **Aporetic Thinking**

The challenge to thought that the nine-page “Sociology Hesitant” poses brings to mind an ancient story of aporia that recalls the classical Greek sense of *aporos* (without passage, without issue, not treadable) as

a figure of the fundamental irreducibility and undecidability of concepts or phenomena. The story of *aporia* that comes to mind is of a man in ancient times, when the gods regularly presented themselves to humans masked as humble, and often lowly, creatures as a ruse to trick mortals into judgment. The man came home one day—very mindful, for some reason, of the Apollonian oracle in Sophocles' *Oedipus*—to find a filthy beggar squatting in the door of his house, obstructing his entrance. Because he was very mindful at the time of *Oedipus*, he was acutely aware of the risk in misconstruing the signs of gods, signs often so capricious yet common in their event that they were not immediately evident as prodigies to be read. One could not know what to make of such seemingly everyday occurrences, such was how the gods loved to playfully address humans. And if one could not know, then how could one judge the truth or value of events? This was the man's dilemma. The event of the beggar/god called him to move. He was obliged by the beggar/god's presence blocking the doorway to his house to make a judgment of what he must prudently do. To throw the bum out had its obvious risk, not the risk of being soundly trounced by a superior being, but the greater risk of victory. For if it was indeed no more than a beggar he threw out, that would be the end of it; but if it was a god, then he would have bested or abused a superior being of the sort well known for harboring a grudge. *Hubris* was not the trap that this poor soul fell into; that would have required the conceit of presuming the priority of his own will. Whereas this man was well aware, *Oedipus* in mind, that whatever choice he had, he had as a consequence to the obligation placed on him by the event of the beggar/god. In a peculiar way, he was passive before the event, having no knowledge—that is, no speculative grounds—on which to base the judgment he was compelled to make. It was in full mindfulness of this passivity that he turned away from his house and laid the foundation for a new home right next door. Such a judgment is still called *hypothesis* (*υποθεσις*).

Hypothesis in the encounter with the unknowable, with the very limits of thought and knowledge, is what Du Bois's essay "Sociology Hesitant" is about. Writing about the confusion of field he discovered in his reading of the Saint Louis Exposition, Du Bois goes on to state:

A part of this confusion of field was inevitable to any attempt at classifying knowledge, but the major part pointed to a real confusion of mind as to the field and method of Sociology. For far more than forty years we have wandered in this sociological wilderness, lisping a peculiar patois, uttering fat books and yet ever conscious of a funda-

mental confusion of thought at the very foundations of our science—something so wrong that while a man boasts himself an Astronomer, and acknowledges himself a Biologist, he owns to Sociology only on strict compulsion and with frantic struggles. (SH, 38)

The principal concern of “Sociology Hesitant” is methodology, and in methodology, hypothesis is a principle offered as a conditional explanation of a fact or a group of facts. It is also a principal provisional assumption about something, used as a guiding norm in making observations until verified or disproved by subsequent evidence. Hypothesis is provisional and conditional because it is based on probable and insufficient arguments or elements. It is not an arbitrary opinion, however, but a justifiable assumption. The difficulty is in understanding the beginnings of the justification. How is the principle principal?

The immediate figure of unknowability at hand in “Sociology Hesitant” is the Spencerian social, whose radical positivism Du Bois recognizes as an index of a profound failure of mind: the failure to engage or enact with the intelligence that occurs precisely at the limits of knowledge, at the moment of encounter with what is discernible but remains unknowable. This is the moment when all a priori categories of thought can do no more than refer to the limits of thought, and to the extent to which they are clung to as the limits of possibility, there is a regrettable—if not sinful—celebration of solipsism in the name of freedom. The sin occurs when the capacities of reason are heralded as the agency of intelligence and this becomes truth as law, according to which all sound, valid judgments are derived from the immutable first principles of thought as reason. Du Bois aimed for more than a critique of sociological positivism in “Sociology Hesitant,” however. He struggled in a commendably straightforward and obviously uncertain way for the language with which to articulate the enactment of an intelligence that exceeds the limits of reason but does not diminish or enthrall human thinking. This is an intelligence that is heterogeneous to that of the human—it is about the human but not of the human; it is the encounter with this intelligence that occasions a striking awareness of the infinite possibilities of human thinking. This is what Kant, the philosopher whom Du Bois’s essay explicitly invokes in contradiction to positivism, called the sublime, the encounter with which brings about awareness of freedom in reason. Freedom, for Du Bois, however, is not the grounds for judgment but an asymptote. It is the postulate of the infinity of thinking and so is an enactment of that very unbridled imagination Kant sought to discipline to the law of reason and

categorical thought. The indeterminate Kantian ego that Du Bois explicitly invokes at the end of the essay as remedy to Spencerian positivism is that particular intelligence articulated in the encounter of thought and that force somehow beyond thought and reason which Kant called lawless, while recognizing that it haunts human thinking like “an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to open to our gaze.”<sup>22</sup> Aristotle already knew the dynamism of this *phantasia*, already sought to account for the indeterminate agency of figure in his thinking. In “Sociology Hesitant,” Du Bois attempts to provide his own account of dynamism. Like Aristotle, he does so in the effort to formulate some theory of soul as the dynamic possibility of intelligence, articulated as thinking. This dynamic, for him, was enacted by the figure of the Negro.

More precisely, the meditations of “Sociology Hesitant” are about the *socius* not being a problematic of the true. To state this, of course, is to presume that the problem of society on which “Sociology Hesitant” is apparently immediately focused implies a concern with the problematic of association. It is not simply a question of what is the friend or associate as the functor of “society.” More than this is shown to be at stake in the essay’s pronounced engagement with the question, Is it possible to model (logically) a truthful description of the *socius*, from which is derived the prescription for a just society? Du Bois’s answer is no, or rather not yet. The situation within which determining whether such derivation is possible in the future is what is essayed in these meditations.

Truth and justice can be claimed here, because it is the disarticulation of them that preoccupies “Sociology Hesitant,” and pronouncedly so when Du Bois asks of the work of “Spencer and his imitators,” “And what is Descriptive Sociology?” and then answers, “It is a description of those Thoughts, and Thoughts of Things, and Things that go to make human life an effort to trace in the deeds and actions of men great underlying principles of harmony and development—a philosophy of history with modest and mundane ends, rather than eternal, teleological purpose” (SH, 39). It is significant that Du Bois remarks this as a work of will—“good, inspiring . . . work.” It is even more significant that he, for whom the will is a force, should

22. . . . ist eine verborgene Kunst in den Tiefen der menschlichen Seele, deren wahre—Handgriffe wir der Natur schwerlich jemals abraten und sie unverdeckt vor Augen legen werde. See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (1926; reprint, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1971), 141; my translation.

also remark it as limited, limited by incorrigible knowledge. This is about more than just corrupt data. Nor is it even about the failure of Spencer and company to adhere to the rigorous pragmatics of descriptive discourse, in which propositions are paramount—although Du Bois does take enough time to note how poor a dialectician Spencer proved to be. Rather, the limit against which willful work is placed is about the occasion—and for Du Bois, this is imperative—afforded at the limit for understanding the situatedness of knowledge, and for understanding that the situation is so infinite in its regress that it cannot justify its precepts except hypothetically.

Although the explicit focus of Du Bois's critique of positivism is the *socius*, it is difficult to disassociate the essay's careful elaboration of a theory of the indeterminate agency of intelligence from his previous and subsequent engagements of the Negro as an instance of just such agency. Indeed, it takes considerable effort not to see the Negro sitting at the edge of "Sociology Hesitant." Recall the story of the beggar/god, whose relevance to "Sociology Hesitant" stems from its antiquity and well-constructed anonymity, as well as its wonderfully succinct account of the relation of boundaries between knowledge and judgment. In fact, the Negro who sits at the edge of the essay is very much about the meditation of boundaries, and not in the sense of contemplating the pragmatics of border crossings between two well-defined camps or nations confronting one another. On the contrary, the celebrated "doubleness" of the Negro is about being in a situation of ceaseless movement and ruses. Being a problem, being the Negro problem, that is, involves style. It is about cutting a bias across the field without there being a determinate reference by which to judge the opponent's strength—at times, one's opponent seems infinite in power, and at other times frail and seemingly without any autonomy. There is no discourse of truth, in the propositional sense, on such a situation—that is to say, neither is any significant resolution discovered in discriminating between verbs of cognition and those of judgment; the sort of game that would give such a sentence as "I do not know if he is a god, but I believe him to be a beggar." To judge in such a situation is to do so on opinion alone, by hypothesis or postulate, which is to venture an action in response to an obligation that comes from beyond knowledge. For Du Bois, the obligation was manifest in the figure of the Negro—in particular, the newly freed rustic folk, the *paganus*, that loomed so large as the addressing obligation in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which, lest we forget, is presented as an extended prayer—and the action was sociology's, whose hypotheses were being formulated in the Atlanta Conferences.

A prayer is not the same type of utterance as a proposition. Or so Aristotle remarked. That remark has been perfunctory within the intellectual tradition that claims him as an ancestor. In fact, he made the remark with regard to sentences, or more exactly, with regard to defining sentences as *semiotikos*, as having meaning but not necessarily having in them, as sentences, truth or falsity. The type of sentences that have in them truth or falsity—of which it can be said that they are true or false—are propositions, or *apophantikos*. In Du Bois's analysis, sociology hesitates between prayer and proposition, and then tries to pass off a prayer as descriptive discourse, and in so doing fails to come to judgment so that it can continue to pretend to know. He seeks to rectify this sorry situation by bringing us to judgment, and one that is, above all, just but not rational. In a more contemporary idiom, throughout his various writings, Du Bois enacts an intelligence that imaginatively maximizes the prevalent concept of the social world, thereby betraying the "Idea" of the social world as undemonstrable or antinomic—it bears pointing out again that, for Du Bois, the Negro was the antinomic figure, par excellence. As Jean-François Lyotard reminds us, this "Idea" is a Kantianism, according to which the concept is followed beyond what reality can sensibly give—which is why Ideas for Kant are susceptible to being illusory or paralogical—revealing what can be thought, the infinite scope of thinking.<sup>23</sup>

Although this is so throughout Du Bois's writings, it is the explicit stated project in "Sociology Hesitant," both in terms of its Kantian beginnings as well as the formulation of the Idea as a horizon that gives us no contents for prescriptions but merely regulates our prescriptive statements, guiding us in knowing what is just.<sup>24</sup>

### Just Chance and Law

"Sociology Hesitant" offers a sketch, or hypotyposis, of the ways in which Du Bois's often recounted shifts of attitude regarding the relationship between truth and legitimate knowledge were derivatives of a complex array of subtle realignments in his conception of the relation of speculative knowledge to social praxis. The point of departure for that sketch is the critique of positivism that is the major key of Du Bois's essay and that explicitly challenges the empiricist dogma of the heterogeneity of observation and theory,

23. Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 58.

24. Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, 77.

discovering science to be itself historical in a way that anticipates the work of Norwood Russell Hanson—and even intimated the direction that Thomas Kuhn would take. It is not my aim in this to argue for something as predictably mundane as the claim that Du Bois was the first to deconstruct the doctrine of the unity of science; although it is noteworthy that he appears to have been among those whose work sets the stage for what transpired from Carl Gustav Hempel and Kuhn. Nonetheless, this is not what interests me as much as how, in his attempt to understand what the Negro is, Du Bois discovers in this question the occasion for recognizing perennial problematics of thought, specifically the historicity of mind. I am not at all convinced, however, that what is understood as Du Bois's investment in historical consciousness is the end of the project. On the contrary, I think there is sufficient textual evidence for speculating that it was one of a series of indexes for his attempt to think about the mind as a function of the difference between eventfulness and meaningfulness—in other words, as a function of intelligence. This last conjecture is difficult and requires a complex elaboration to be more accessible, something I am not prepared to do now. I will just note, in order that the end of this introductory essay appear somewhat coherent, that although by 1905, when composing "Sociology Hesitant," Du Bois had clearly come to think of the Negro problem in terms of historical consciousness—or the subject of experience—I am not at all persuaded that that is where he stopped, even then.

On assuming the directorship of the Atlanta Conferences in 1897, Du Bois thought that pursuing the systematic study of social phenomena would enable both rational prediction and the deliberate modification of social action legitimated by a moral imperative. He was so confident about the relationship between empirical research and social reform he proclaimed that the "long-term remedy [to racism] was Truth," by which he meant "carefully gathered scientific proof that neither color nor race determined the limits of a man's capacity or desert."<sup>25</sup> Du Bois's emphasis on the significance of empirical research as an instrument for social reform stemmed from his German formation—in particular, the influence of his dissertation director, Schmoller, whose own work argued for a science based on ethics. But, contrary to Broderick's presumption, influence is not merely derivative. Schmoller's "empiricism"—which was pointedly in contradiction to the

25. W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," in *What the Negro Wants*, ed. Rayford W. Logan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 49. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as MEP.

Manchester school of political economy—was predicated on his postulate that meaning (value) is situational, rather than abstract or ideal, and that quantifiable data provide firm grounds for logical inferences about social dynamics and conditions. This postulate Du Bois undoubtedly received from Schmoller. And he was so careful in his reception of it that he never quite lost sight of the understanding of meaning as situational. Consequently, in Du Bois's empirical studies—including *The Philadelphia Negro*—to the extent that statistics bears any resemblance to the social situation, it is indicative and not representational. That is, numbers indicate both a particular intuitive capacity for perceiving reality as well as something of the nature of reality itself. Here, in his approach to arithmetic value, is where Du Bois is most ardently Kantian, refusing the post-Kantian distinction of intuitionism and logicism. This will be made clearer a little later on when our attention turns to his handling of induction. What warrants noting at this point is that because Du Bois's handling of induction was in a situation so unlike that which concerned Schmoller, in accordance with Schmoller's postulate, the thinking undertaken could not be derivative in any idealist way. Indeed, "Sociology Hesitant" is pronounced in its critique of ideology. The impulse for that critique has its beginnings in Du Bois's earlier work in the Atlanta Conferences.

The Atlanta Conferences were an extremely ambitious project for the young sociologist in a fledgling field. Du Bois tried to organize them as a hundred-year program of data gathering and analysis, divided into a series of ten decade-long studies in specified areas that coincided with developments in various disciplines of the human sciences—anthropology, psychology, social statistics, history, and so on. The project was to reflect and coincide with the formation of the current authorized organization of knowledge in the university. But, more importantly, it was to realize the university's function as the application of knowledge to social organization, through a scientific analysis of human reaction toward caste and discrimination, an analysis based on the collection and classification of considerable objective data on the Negro's social condition, which would function as a fundamental metaphor for universal social development.<sup>26</sup> Conceptualized as it was along the contours of the then emerging research university, the project was intended to be paradigmatic of the black intelligentsia's function as agent

26. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Atlanta Conferences," *Voice of the Negro* 1 (March 1904): 85–89. Reprinted in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Green and Driver, 53–60. Subsequent references are to the latter publication.

of social change. The long-term agenda of the Atlanta Conferences was to achieve the demystification of the Negro as a social phenomenon (MEP, 49). Its success, however, relied on the intellectual's being able to determine the nature of things, not by way of the presumed black community's opinion or perception of reality (*doxa*), nor even by the perception of the greater community at large, but rather in a more immediate way, provided by scientific inquiry.<sup>27</sup>

For Du Bois, then, the question of the Negro's social status in America was basically one of legitimate intellectual activity or method. The intellectual is vested not so much with a capacity for thought but with an agency of thinking, which is, itself, understood to be an attitude in a profoundly geometric way. It is not quite correct to state that this attitude, for Du Bois, was just methodological.

If we are to follow Alain Locke's and Rampersad's engagements with this Du Boisian attitude, then perhaps we would understand the context within which Du Bois composed "Sociology Hesitant" and how he came to the conception of science as the theoretical understanding of existent phenomena in conjunction with his attempt to establish a teleology capable of sustaining a proscriptive ethics of social action. The presumption being that Du Bois's impulse was to free ethics from metaphysics, particularly the scholastic discipline of *metaphysica specialis* (the combined disciplines of theology, cosmology, and psychology, whose object was the *summum ens*, "the highest Being"). Such a presumption finds warrant in Du Bois's own claims for his project. Because he understood the concern of teleology to be the determination of the legitimate foundation of normative ethics—Du Bois initially conceived of his project as determining happiness in obedience to duty, or, simply put, good will—it must be autonomous from the contingencies of experience in order to ground its proscriptions in a realization of the final end or purpose of duty. This meant that the cognitive model must be rational and a priori in the strictest sense. Accordingly, the cognitive ideal for Du Bois in the early stage of the Atlanta Conferences (say, 1897–1903) was mathematical knowledge. At the same time, science, whose descriptive and theoretical interests pertain only to existents, was to be distinct from teleology, whose interests are practical and proscriptive, involving morality, the ought or *sollen*. In an attempt to clear a space for the foundation of a deontological ethics, Du Bois, through teleology, bound the question of duty to

27. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Study of the Negro Problems," in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Sociology and the Black Community*, ed. Green and Driver, 80.

the resolution of the cause and purpose of life, which was accessible only through empirical procedures that avoided transcendental categories.

On this view, science is logically instrumental, in that its propositions are only conditionally heuristic or proscriptive, and never absolutely so, and ethically instrumental, in its promoting the *summum bonum*, or Absolute Good, postulated as the unity of knowledge and moral purpose. At the onset of his tenure as director of the Atlanta Conferences, Du Bois maintained that science serves technological social interests. He also held the position that these social interests were mediated objects of scientific inquiry; science's only immediate and essential object being one simple aim: the discovery of truth.<sup>28</sup> This, he argued, was especially so for sociological research, where the confusion of methodology with panaceas of social reform could result in the connecting of social investigation with groundless assumptions.<sup>29</sup> At this point, Du Bois was heavily invested in the precepts of scientific positivism, according to which science's interests were purely theoretical, analyzing and classifying phenomena in order to facilitate the realization of moral interests.

Predictably, however, the distinction between data and significance, or meaning, which is the structural fault of positivism, presented serious difficulties. On the one hand, the accumulated data of the Atlanta Conferences—what Du Bois came to regard as “a growing tangled mass of facts”—was so immense and variegated that all the analyses were indeterminate, making it nearly impossible to produce anything like an account of systematic meaning. On the other hand, this failure to arrive at a meaningful account of the data meant a serious delay in developing a scientifically based proscriptive program of social improvement or uplift.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Du Bois came to suspect that there were severe limitations to his concept of theory's ability to immediately address the issue of the Negro's social survival, limitations that became apparent with his discerning there to be a problematic of field entailed in the methodology of positive sociology. As a result of this suspicion and the problems encountered in the interpretation and application of the purely speculative interests of the Atlanta Conferences, Du Bois was led to reevaluate both his belief in the establishment of the truth about the Negro as a viable resolution to the problem of racism and his idea of the relation of the intellectual to society.

28. Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” 80.

29. See Broderick, *W. E. B. Du Bois, Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis*, 29.

30. Du Bois, “The Atlanta Conferences,” 53–54.

With considerable candor, he confessed that by 1903, he began to know the problem of Negroes in the United States as being a “present startling reality.” Moreover, when confronted with situations of this reality that called for immediate action in order to prevent social death, he understood that his conception of knowledge entailed a dangerous disjunction between theory and its practical consequences.<sup>31</sup> What this meant for Du Bois’s conception of the function of the intellectual in society was that those practical interests previously held to be distant from the immediate aims of science were now recognized as being at the center of what science achieved. In other words, what Du Bois had previously regarded as the practical interests of ethics—truth defined as the unity of moral purpose and reality—now corresponded to the recognized instrumental interests of science.

This is not to suggest that Du Bois abandoned a notion of truth as such or, for that matter, the idea of moral duty. He did not doubt the existence of an absolute reality qua the actualization of duty in nature, only the possibility of comprehending it in historical knowledge. Du Bois began to question the validity of any justification for judgment and action that claims to derive its legitimacy from a rational procedure of speculation.

This shift in attitude bears a striking resemblance to what would later be known, apropos the Einstein-Bohr debates, as the measurement problem of quantum mechanics. It is noteworthy, in that regard, that the measurement problem of quantum mechanics results from the problem of several principles of quantum theory appearing to be in conflict. In particular, the dynamic principles of quantum mechanics seem to be in conflict with the postulate of collapse.<sup>32</sup> The measurement problem raises broader issues as well, touching on general philosophical debates between, on the one hand, Cartesian and Lockean accounts of observation as the creation of “inner reflections” and, on the other, neo-Kantian conceptions of observation as a quasi-externalized physiological process. The first of these debates pre-occupied Du Bois throughout his career, as is evident in his lengthy notes on the problematic of feeling in his unpublished materials. In “Sociology Hesitant,” however, he offers—concomitant with the critique of positivism—a neo-Kantian phenomenology according to which indeterminacy is a dominant feature of any coincidental correlation of things as they are and things

31. Du Bois, “The Atlanta Conferences,” 56.

32. I want to thank Henry Krips for helping me in understanding this correlation. See also Henry Krips, “Measurement in Quantum Theory,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (winter 1999 ed.), available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win1999/entries/qt-measurement/.old>.

as they are for us. In this phenomenology, insofar as science is principally instrumental and dedicated to discovering the universal laws of objective reality qua nature, it is not in itself truth. That is, the discoveries of science do not eventually lead to a teleology of ethics in which the universal morality or duty that legitimates action can be discovered. Morality cannot be determined objectively; it can only be postulated as the telos of a moral self-consciousness, whose conception implied a relation to an otherness, the given of empirical experience.

The frequently cited conflict between Du Bois's investment in a pure scientific understanding (pace his statistical studies for the United States Department of Labor, reviews of scientific reports, and the studies of the Atlanta Conferences) and his commitment to achieving social change through scientific inquiry (*The Philadelphia Negro*) resulted from his recognizing the complete indifference and independence of the facts of empirical reality toward moral purpose and activity, and his persistent sense of duty as an essential feature of humanity. For Du Bois, duty was the substance of the exigency of action, the unavoidability of having to make a choice. On the one hand, as a social activist, Du Bois maintained that moral consciousness is actual and active, and in its actuality and action fulfilling duty. On the other hand, as a philosopher of science, he understood that this fulfillment is not immediately actualized in reality. If happiness is understood as the achievement of purpose in action, and allowing that the purpose of the moral self-consciousness in its action is the realization of duty in reality qua nature, then the moral self-consciousness is certainly unhappy, because it perceives in nature only an occasion for acting and not the realization of purpose in its action.

There is no need, nor is this the place, to rehearse Hegel's full demonstration of the dissemblances and duplicities entailed in the contradictory presuppositions of the moral consciousness. What is important, however, is to gain some insight into what Du Bois effects in his displacement of the *summum bonum*. It is not only the concept of the supreme good that is identical with the scholastic notion of God, but, and more pertinent to our interests, it is the idea of happiness in obedience to duty. It is *das unglückliche Bewußtsein*, the unhappy consciousness, that replaces the postulate of harmony between morality and nature with the imperfect state of a relativistic indeterminate agency. But unlike Hegel, for Du Bois, this state is not realized logically; rather, it is discovered through empirical procedures, procedures, however, that do not lead Du Bois to discover the factual basis for morality any more than they would lead Hegel to discover a logical one.

Thus he is propelled down a path toward a crisis in his conception of the relation of knowledge to truth that will finally put the idea of duty at some risk.

As already indicated, this crisis came to a head around the third year of Du Bois's directorship of the Atlanta Conferences; in the face of his inability to make the accumulated observations of the Atlanta Conferences meaningful, Du Bois began to find a serious flaw in the historicist understanding of historical meaning in which he had been trained at Harvard. He came to the realization that historicist predictions are unconditional and fallacious insofar as they are treated as a given for systems. The only logical way that such unconditional predictions could be legitimate would be if society were a closed system in which unconditional predictions of the future are clearly derived from conditional predictions of inference—for example, given *A* then *B*. The Negro problem in its immediacy, however, resisted such a totality. This is best exemplified in Hegel's successful elaboration of history as the unfolding of the Absolute's self-consciousness within a very specifically described line of *Translatio*, so assuring foreknowledge of its ends. In plainer words, "History," understood in this way, is not universal, and, accordingly, neither is the principal object of its study: liberal society.

It has been generally accepted that this crisis developed out of the conflict between the pure empiricism of Spencer's method and Du Bois's continued adherence to the idea of duty's paramount importance. Du Bois's supposed "turn" to the pragmatism of James does not resolve this conflict but rather displaces it in a contentious process of cognition that resists resolution, a process that Du Bois called "a dialect of progression," whose two terms are *natural law* (necessity) and *chance* (indeterminacy) (MEP, 57–58). By so displacing the conflict of science and teleology to a reified sphere of cognitive activity, he gained a deferral for the resolution of cause and purpose in action by which the actualization of duty was to be determined.

The question of duty was bracketed and left outstanding, and the relativization of knowledge was meant to clear a space for the introduction of an axiology that would problematize the material basis for theories of social determinism and their concomitant legitimation of racism. By deferring the resolution of cause and purpose in action, Du Bois engaged in a critique of empiricism, but this also implied a challenge to the historical consciousness that defined and was defined by liberal society. I contend that this did not precipitate his launching a new historicism but rather was the beginning of an attempt to discover just what sort of intelligence is called for to give an account of the world that is not determined by the Kantian subject-of-experience. At the same time, however, Du Bois resisted retreating into

the subject-of-knowledge in his attempt to give a meaningful account of the Negro problem. That is to say, understanding what the Negro is requires a radical recognition of the historicity of intelligence.

In this light, the attractiveness of pragmatism—as a model of cognition predicated on the disjunction of truth and knowledge—for Du Bois, rests not in its being based on a notion of the instrumentality of hypothesis but in its being based on the workable logic of hypothesis if its truth were assumed. Du Bois became concerned with the discovery of fundamental assumptions (hypothesis) and the working out of their derivative logics. In this way, he could construe James's anti-essentialism—which dissolved the distinction between truth and belief, knowledge and value, by holding truth to be what it is good for us to believe—as supporting a notion of the universal relativity of knowledge. Then again, the foregrounding of the historical character of the given is not intended to produce a notion of radical divergence that would negate the conception of an ultimate morality recognized in a world history that “discovers” the essential homogeneity of humanity through the universality of relative values. Duty is preserved as an unanswerable question, unanswerable except in terms of its specific localized expression. It is no longer pure but remains always as an essentially absolute telos in which the cultural frame of reference is grounded.

From the point of view of Du Bois's pragmatism, as far as we might call it such, inductive method (quantifiability) and typological analysis are recognized as being part of the *Entzauberung*: the desacralization of the precapitalist world, in which natural law is reconceptualized as a constructed frame of reference marking objective reality and interacting with our indeterminate knowledge (which Du Bois at times refers to as being an autonomous dynamics) in the dialectic of progression, producing the referent or daily life (MEP, 57). Intelligence-in-action, or *Intellectus Agens*, becomes the process by which reality is actively generated. Du Bois came to this understanding as a result of recognizing positivism's failure to conceptualize, beyond the purely abstract, its object of analysis. Consequently, he began to inquire into the process by which the positive methodology first defined by Auguste Comte and then developed by Spencer obscured, to the point of transparency, the historical character of the given of sociological study. It is in this context that Du Bois wrote “Sociology Hesitant.”

Du Bois begins his inquiry in “Sociology Hesitant” by noting how the contrast between the factual and the illusionary that characterizes Comte's conceptualization of the positive soul facilitates the separation of science from metaphysics. This contrast, he notes, enables Comte's displacement

of reflection on the conditions for the constitution of possible objects of causal-analytic knowledge—such as that of philosophic epistemology, which reflects on the meaning of knowledge in terms of the knowing subject's reflection on itself—in favor of the methodological analysis of scientific procedures. The result is the ascendancy of the investigation of the history of modern science and the analysis of the social consequences of institutionalized scientific-technical progress. Positivist philosophy of science replaces Kantian epistemology on the grounds that a philosophy of science that restricts epistemology to methodology, predicated on the assumption of the autochthonous science of formal logic and mathematics, can define knowledge by the institutionally determined achievement of the sciences. By systematizing science as an encyclopedic law, Comte isolates methodological principles from their epistemological context and refers them directly to the process of development in the modern sciences and in the progressive rationalization of social relations which that process engenders.

A brief overview of the positivist project as conceptualized by Comte is warranted, in order to understand why Du Bois calls for a return to Kantian epistemology at the close of "Sociology Hesitant."

Comte's law of the three stages of human development (the theological, metaphysical, and, finally, positive era) was effectively a philosophy of history that mediated the severing of science from any a priori knowledge frame of reference. The effect of this was to dislodge assertions of pre-Critical epistemology from the system of reference of the knowing, self-reflecting subject and to reduce them to heuristic stipulations of scientific methodology. This rearrangement put scientific-technical progress in the place of the epistemological subject as the subject of a scientific philosophy of history, or a history of science. The resulting devaluation of the philosophical concept of knowledge was compensated for by the further explication of the meaning of science itself. Once the positivist cleaning was done, all that remained were facts, which for legitimate positive knowledge had nothing to do with orientations of inquiry concerned with suprasensible unfathomables. These suprasensible things were thought to be meaningless due to their undecidability. Whatever was problematic in its indeterminacy was bracketed by positivist method until a greater degree of accuracy in classification was eventually gained. Reliable knowledge was guaranteed by the unity of method, which had priority over substance, because the very certainty of knowledge of the substance was gotten via sound method. In this sense, the precision of knowledge was attained only by systematic construction of theories that admit the deduction of lawlike hypotheses. Of

course, such a combination of rationalist and empiricist principles of knowledge was possible precisely because these no longer functioned as aspects of an epistemology. They became instead normative rules of procedure, figured in Comte's celebrated definition of science: *Savoir pour prévoir et prévoir pour pouvoir* (knowledge in order to predict, and prediction in order to enable action).

The identification of true knowledge and instrumentality follows logically. In short fashion, we have a view toward infinite scientific progress, albeit one that functioned in a dialectic relationship with order. But even the latter was gained via the appropriate understanding of the character of natural laws. The ultimate goal, then, was to rationalize the whole of reality. The immanent goal was to rationalize the immediate social reality. Because social phenomena are the most complex of phenomena subject to rationalization, the extent to which complexity limited the degree of exactitude in prediction was nullified through the fundamental distinction applicable to any phenomena: that between the static and the dynamic state of every field of positive study.<sup>33</sup>

Positivism's study of the static social organism coincided with the positive theory of order; and the study of the dynamic supported the positive theory of progress. Defined according to the conception of a just harmony of the various elements of human society, the static laws of the social organism had as their principle a general consensus.

The assumption underlying all of this is that there is a fundamental solidarity of all aspects of the social organism. Nor is it of little consequence that, at this point, Comte himself felt no need to demonstrate this assumption. He thought it quite evident that in the continuous dynamic progress of humanity, in the experience of universal reaction to every modification in any given social structure, social consensus is a fundamental principle of social organization (Comte, 2:150). Linking the two concepts of order and progress in this way, Comte sought to overcome the social dissolution of modernity that had resulted, in his view, from their having been disjuncted by Descartes. By keeping in view simultaneously both the study of social statics and dynamics, positivism would be resistant to the charge of being purely speculative.

Perhaps Comte's greatest investment was in the concept of a just

33. Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, ed. Michel Serres, François Dagoguet, Allal Sinaceur (Paris: Hermann, 1975), 48th lecture, 2:147; my translation. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as Comte.

harmony that operates between the whole and the parts in the social structure as a fundamental principle for the study of the static. This principle extended to the solidarity of political institutions and social manners, making them, as well as other codes and ideas, necessarily interdependent (Comte, 2:152–53). This entire system was attached to the corresponding state of human development.

A point warranting some attention is the problem authority presented to this model. This question of authority is important to us here in light of Du Bois's understanding of the vulnerability of sociology on this point, leading him to accuse Comte of a certain hesitation that undermines his initial insistence on the verifiability of facts. The aim of Comte's formula, "authority derives from cooperation," is to preserve the indissoluble continuity of solidarity and methodological integrity, even at a point of extreme crisis in authority—as in political revolution. Indeed, what Du Bois characterizes as Comte's wanderings into metaphysical abstractions (SH, 38–40) proves to be the latter's attempt to expand his system of human development to the point of comprehending historic disruptions in consensus, such as the French Revolution, by reducing them to the principle of dynamics or progress. In so doing, the universal continuity of positive progress is preserved.

Plainly put, Du Bois concludes that the principle of solidarity is a psychologism (SH, 41–42). Indeterminacy and power in association reveal this in the problem that they pose for the concept of a just harmony that operates between the whole and the parts in the social structure. Comte tried to skirt this issue in his handling of the arbitrary and eccentric legislator who is empowered with sufficient authority to be capable of the complete negation of solidarity by suggesting that power and authority are synonymous. More exactly, by asserting that all political power is by nature authorized, he could ignore any consideration of the sudden unauthorized concentrations of sufficient material means to disrupt consensus. Comte explained such an occurrence as taking place on the basis of some initial group consensus about aims and means. This explanation was supported by the presumption that the social organism is relatively homogeneous, so that struggles of power are comprehended within the larger field of the social organism as a contest between inclusive subgroups—each with its internal solidarity—over ascendant authority. This presupposed, in turn, a universal consensus about the possibility of such authority.

For Du Bois, this explanation led to the trap of adhering to an optimistic maintenance of the organizational status quo. Positivism tried to

avoid this trap in a conception of natural law that incorporated the idea of a natural order as a concomitant of harmony. By making the notion of consensus of the social organism the fundamental principle of “the new political philosophy,” Comte preserved the methodological integrity of his system (Comte, 2:157). The paramount requirement for method is complete rational predictability of action.

Du Bois’s contention is that the historical character of the “facts” cannot be accommodated on the basis of the fundamental principle of classification that Comte posited at the beginning of his *Course*—a principle by which classification results from the study of the objects to be classified and is determined by the affinities indicated by their affiliation, being itself the expression of the most general fact relating to these objects and elucidated by in-depth comparison of the objects. There is also the corresponding notion that by completing the principle of natural law through the consideration of increasing complexity in phenomena, one also completes the conception of order through that of a simultaneous increase in imperfection. There is little truck in positivism for indeterminacy as a variable in the production of observed social phenomena.

This is a point requiring some explanation, since it was the absurdity of the notion of a consummation of harmony in progress toward truth that caused Du Bois to reconceptualize the Atlanta Conferences on the basis that principles of action be derived from observed immediate phenomena and circumstance (MEP, 56–57). Should the field of the social organism be highly heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, then there is no imminent possibility of the sum of the subgroups’ solidarities constituting a universal consensus. A limit to respective group authority is thus described, and the assumption of universal solidarity is preempted. In such a case, the presumption of universal solidarity must be tested, because the social organism is marked by a radical relativity in its constituent elements. Any study of these latter elements would discover incoherence and conflict between the aggregates, rather than their action and reaction on one another in accordance with a just harmony. Accounting for such events requires introducing indeterminacy into the conceptual model of the social realm. Du Bois understood well the damage this did to the universality of positivism’s totality of social phenomena. In order for the assertion that there is a totality of social phenomena to be sustained, there can be no externality except that periphery delimited by the method. There is no place for chance in this model, except as an index of the not yet determinable. In this fashion (and it is the only way out for positivism), Comte reduced the most extreme

alterities imagined—Western Europe and Eastern Asia—to a question of diminishing affinity, brought about by decreased contact (Comte, 2:151). What was critically problematic for Du Bois was the tacit assumption that they once were identical and that this needs no proof (Comte, 2:151).

Having exposed positivism's principle of harmony to be an implicit indeterminate postulate, Du Bois reveals that all that remained for positivism was the very thing Comte set out to overcome: the contradiction of instrumental knowledge and reality. Harmony was postulated for the sake of purposeful action as an ideal telos. Otherwise, the realization of instrumental purposes would not be possible. The relation between instrumental knowledge, or positivist methodology, and the postulated harmony was construed in a way that enabled action: The harmony of instrumental knowledge and reality is postulated as a limit in relation to which all action must be accounted for. Since any given action does take place, and so is taken seriously, any apparent disharmony between its purpose and reality could not be taken seriously. The fact of the act, however, remained specific or individual, and the result contingent. But because the agenda of positivism was the resolution of conflict as the final purpose of the world on nothing less than a universal scale, actuality of truth could not be restricted by the contingencies of individual action. Or again, if reality is taken to be nature, having its own laws and standing in contrast to pure instrumental knowledge, so that the latter cannot realize its interests within nature, then to the extent that the instrumental interests or methodology are essentially all that matter, what is sought after is not truth as the unity of knowledge and reality but truth as the realization of instrumental ends in nature. It follows that for positivism, reality as the limit of knowledge would no longer be of consequence. Harmony must remain an unrealized postulate in order to avoid contradiction. The risk of contradiction was avoided by positivism in its concentration on general principles rather than on the investigation of facts. Of course, this is just the hesitation that Du Bois denounces as stemming from positivism's refusal to abandon its axiomatic postulates when particular "facts" failed to exemplify the essential law.

Du Bois knows that the formation of an objective field of analysis, and the application of knowledge to the facts of that field in the form of action, does not derive from purely logical or methodological sources but can be understood only in the context of material social processes. For Du Bois, not only are facts products of complex social and historical processes, but science as a particular activity is a moment in the social process of production and is not self-sufficient. The fact that concerns Du Bois above all

others is the Negro, his status as an object of analysis within the particular and various fields of science, both physical and social. This involves the relation of the cognitive to the given that is at the crux of his positing of the Negro as a valid object of positive study so as to betray the dissemblance of racism in deterministic sociologies that assume an empirical basis for racial differentiation and hierarchy.

Du Bois's critique of abstracting theoretical praxis from the interested motivations of social life practices aimed to demystify institutionalized racism and was grounded in his recognizing discourse—especially scientific discourse—as fundamentally political. From the Atlanta Conferences to *Black Reconstruction* and beyond, the project was not just about the demystification of racism qua the emancipation of the Negro; it was, as Earl Thorpe characterized the history of black intellectual writing, “about the quest for freedom and equality,” and equality specifically entailed *isonomia* (equal access to the law). At base, Du Bois's grander project foresaw the expansion of consensus to include the Negro; it was about the possibility of a universal solidarity.

We return, then, to the very problem that led Comte to the psychologism Du Bois finds untenable: the assumption that social consensus is a fundamental principle of social organization. Understanding this predicament warrants quoting “Sociology Hesitant” at length.

So he [Comte] said: “Now in the inorganic sciences, the elements are much better known to us than the Whole which they constitute; so that in that case we must proceed from the simple to the compound. But the reverse method is necessary in the study of Man and of Society: Man and Society as a whole being better known to us, and more accessible subjects of study than the parts which constitute them.” And on this dictum has been built a science not of Human Action but of “Society,” a Sociology. Did Comte thus mean to fix scientific thought on the study of an abstraction? Probably not—rather he meant to call attention to the fact that amid the bewildering complexities of human life ran great highways of common likenesses and agreements in human thoughts and action, which world-long observation had already noted and pondered upon. Here we must start the new science, said the Pioneer, this is the beginning. Once having emphasized this point, however, and Comte was strangely hesitant as to the real elements of Society which must sometime be studied—were they men or cells or atoms or something subtler than any of

these? Apparently he did not answer but wandered on quickly to a study of "Society." And yet "Society" was but an abstraction. It was as though Newton, noticing falling as characteristic of matter and explaining the phenomenon as gravitation, had straightway sought to study some weird entity known as Falling instead of soberly investigating Things which fall. So Comte and his followers noted the grouping of men, the changing of government, the agreement in thought, and then, instead of a minute study of men grouping, changing and thinking, proposed to study the Group, the Change, and the Thought and call this new created Thing Society.

Mild doubters as to this method were cavalierly hushed by Spencer's verbal jugglery: "[W]e consistently regard a society as an entity, because though formed of discreet units, a certain concreteness in the aggregate of them is implied by the general persistence of the arrangements among them throughout the area occupied."

Thus were we well started toward metaphysical wanderings—studying not the Things themselves but the mystical Whole which it was argued bravely they did form because they logically must. And to prove this imperative there was begun that bulky essay in descriptive sociology which has been the stock in trade of formal treatises in this science ever since. And what is Descriptive Sociology? It is a description of those Thoughts, and Thoughts of Things, and Things that go to make human life an effort to trace in the deeds and actions of men great underlying principles of harmony and development—a philosophy of history with modest and mundane ends, rather than eternal, teleological purpose. In this line, Spencer and his imitators have done good, inspiring, but limited work. Limited because their data were imperfect—woefully imperfect: depending on hearsay, rumor and tradition, vague speculations, traveller's [*sic*] tales, legends and imperfect documents, the memory of memories and historic error. All our knowledge of the past lay, to be sure, before them. But what is our knowledge of the past as a basis for scientific induction? Consequently the Spencerian Sociologists could only limn a shadowy outline of the meaning and rhythm of human deed to be filled in when scientific measurement and deeper study came to the rescue. Yet here they lovingly lingered, changing and arranging, expressing old thoughts anew, invent[ing] strange terms; and yet withal adding but little to our previous knowledge. This sociologists were not slow to see, and they looked for means of escaping their

viscious logical circle, but looked only in the direction of their going, and not backward toward the initial mistakes. So they came to the essay of two things: they sought the help of biological analogy as a suggestive aid to further study; they sought a new analysis in search of the Sociological Element. The elaborate attempt to compare the social and animal organism failed because analogy implies knowledge but does not supply it—[it] suggests but does not furnish lines of investigation. And who was able to investigate “Society”? Nor was the search for the ultimate Sociological Element more successful. Instead of seeking men as the natural unit of associated men, it strayed further in metaphysical lines, and confounding Things with Thoughts of Things, they sought not the real element of Society but the genesis of our social ideas. Society became for them a mode of mental action, and its germ was—according to their ingenuity—“Consciousness of Kind,” “Imitation,” the “Social Imperative,” and the like. (SH, 38–40)

The criticism of positivism that began with the floundering of the Atlanta Conferences about the disjunction of theory and praxis led Du Bois to realize that the “observations” and “descriptions” of positivist sociology were predicated on a typology of subjective meaning that was in no way ideologically neutral. No purely speculative theoretical interests determine the “law” of social action without some conceptual realization of the practical consequences of the facts gathered, and that entails the practical interests derived from the social context in which theory is constituted. The attempted biological analogy was no less tainted. At this point, Du Bois had not yet sought to apply Marx and Engel’s analysis of capitalism to his own analysis of sociology. Even so, by 1905, he began to suspect that the isolation of intellectual activity derived from the mode of production of capitalist society such that the apparent autonomy of intellectual activity paralleled the presumed freedom of the economic subject operating in bourgeois society.<sup>34</sup>

At issue in the radical disjunction of theoretical and practical domains was not only Du Bois’s explicitly stated aim of situating the Negro’s ontological and subsequently social status in relation to either the objective laws of freedom expressing what ought to happen or the natural laws pertain-

34. In 1904, Du Bois gave a graduate seminar at Atlanta University entitled “Marxism and the Negro.” See *Black Titan, W. E. B. Du Bois: An Anthology by the Editors of “Freedomways,”* ed. John Henrik Clarke et al. (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 79.

ing to what happens. Also at issue was positivism's conception of theory and object field. The indeterminacy of the Negro as an object exposed a tension between theory and praxis that engendered the need for an adjustment either in the modes of praxis or theory. Du Bois's tack was not to collapse the distinction between theory and practice, but rather to demystify the grounds on which theory's ascendancy in that relation was based. This demystification was intended to put in jeopardy the legitimacy of the naïve view that knowledge—defined as what science does—most accurately describes reality. Insofar as the purposefulness of positivism is based on that same legitimacy—expressed in terms of the subordination of social praxis to scientific theory—the success of such a sociology is, thus, also put in jeopardy.

As a result, Du Bois changed his whole attitude toward the function of theory in the social sciences. In the study of human beings and their actions, there could be no divergence between theory and practice. What was required in order to achieve full demystification was that sociology be untethered from its foundation in the study of axiomatic principles of relations, hypostatized as the laws of social action. Sociology had to be reformulated as the attempt to measure chance, or at least the relationship of indeterminacy to law:

Let us go back a bit and ask frankly: Why did Comte hesitate so strangely at the "parts which constitute" Society, and why have men so strangely followed his leading? Is it not very clear that the object of Sociology is to study the deeds of men? Yes, it is clear—clear to us, clear to our predecessors, and yet the very phrasing of such an attempt to reduce human action to law, rule, and rhythm shows how audacious was the plan and why scientists even have quailed before it and, veiling their words in phrases, half-dimmed the intent of their science.

For the Great Assumption of real life is that in the deeds of men 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. Now, in the face of this, to propose calmly the launching of a science which would discover and formulate the exact laws of human action and parallel

“Heat as a mode of motion” with a mathematical formula of “Shakespeare as pure Energy,” or “Edison as electrical force”—simply to propose such a thing seemed to be and was preposterous.

And yet [no matter] how much so even the formulation of such a science seemed unthinkable, just as insistently came the call for scientific knowledge of men. The New Humanism of the 19th century was burning with new interest in human deeds: Law, Religion, Education—all called men to a study of that singular unit of highest human interest, the Individual Man. A Categorical Imperative pushed all thought toward the Paradox:

1. The evident rhythm of human action;
2. The evident incalculability in human action. (SH, 40–41)

Du Bois leaves no doubt that it is this paradox that causes sociology to hesitate and tarry with methodological psychologisms. Yet in asserting that the proper subject of sociology is the singular individual human—and here we are best served in taking this to be a figuration of singularity—he imagines a way past hesitation:

If this is a world of absolute unchanging physical laws, then the laws of physics and chemistry are the laws of all action of stones and stars, and Newtons and Nortons. On the other hand, for a thousand and a thousand years, and today as strongly as, and even more strongly than, ever, men, after experiencing the facts of life, have almost universally assumed that in among physical forces stalk self-directing Wills, which modify, restrain, and re-direct the ordinary laws of nature. The assumption is tremendous in its import. It means that, from the point of view of Science, this is a world of Chance as well as Law; that the conservation of energy and correlation of forces are not universally true, but that out from some unknown Nowhere bursts miraculously now and then controlling Energy. . . .

Why not then flatly face the Paradox? [Why not] frankly state the Hypothesis of Law and the Assumption of Chance, and seek to determine by study and measurement the limits of each? (SH, 41–42)

Although Du Bois maintains a hypothesis of law as an absolute point of reference against which social action can be categorized, and by which the course of human action can in principle be causally explained, the hypothesis of law was heuristic rather than descriptive or analytic with regard to a “given” encountered object. In this, he comes far closer to Charles

Sanders Peirce's *tychism* than he does to William James's pragmatism. Chance is prior to law; it is an assumption. Positivism's solidarity, which presumed the virtue of linking indissolubly the two concepts of order and progress as a means to overcome the social dissolution of modernity, is displaced as a point of departure for inquiry. Instead of regarding the phenomena of social dissolution as the effects of the loss of an antecedent homogeneity—one that by definition and circumstance necessarily excluded the Negro—Du Bois takes as his point of departure the immanent circumstance of disjunction, or fundamental incongruity of heterogeneous processes. Concerning the facts about the singularity discovered at the nexus, if these are socially determined, they are so both through the historical character of the object perceived as well as that of the perceiving moment. Both are shaped by human activity.

It is important to keep in mind that Du Bois's critique of positivism occurs in the course of his erstwhile effort through the Atlanta Conferences to understand the reasons why he conceived of the Negro as an object of analysis that functions as a fundamental metaphor of universal social development. This amounted to his attempt at describing the production and effect of reference in terms of an axiology predicated on a dialectic of chance and law, in which law belongs to the proceeds of chance. That attempt required a new habit of thinking, one that included the natural and human sciences as equally valid yet distinctive modes of accounting for reality.

There is, I think, something more urgent about Du Bois's reevaluation of positivist sociology than merely the recognition that conceptual classification is one of the historical processes by which humans try to adapt to reality in a manner that best suits their practical interests. His critique of positivism's taking society as its fundamental element of study, and his assertion that the individual in its relational matrix is the more suitable fundamental element of analysis, is clearly based on the assumption that there is an essential difference between the individual and society. This distinction between the individual and society is a common feature of both positivism and Du Bois. In the case of positivism, with its presupposition of just harmony and consensus, the individual is conceived of as the passive receiver; the world that is given to the individual and that the individual must accept and take into account is a product of societal activity, which, in its givenness, is construed as an active subjectivity, expressed in the form of natural law. As far as Du Bois was concerned, the thesis of a predetermined harmony is explicitly rejected in favor of the recognition of the priority of chance to law.

In any event, the existence of society is not deemed to be simply the result of a continuous conscious spontaneity of action on the part of free individuals; it is also an effect of capricious happenings, discernible to the mind as processes of action disassociated from will. What is of interest to Du Bois in "Sociology Hesitant" are the characteristics of the intelligence articulated in tandem with such action.

Du Bois's gesture here is a very calculated one. It is an attempt to redirect sociology back toward Kant's anthropological subject. In his own words, the object of sociology is to measure the "Kantian Absolute and Undetermined Ego" (SH, 42). With this, we are brought to one of the more important shifts in Du Bois's conception of the relation between intelligence-in-action and freedom. Du Bois wants to be able to describe, to make explicit and analyze, that which remains "unknowable." In this context, his "Veil" is the figure by which the unknowable is stated as an enactment of intelligence. The aim is to expose thinking as generating complexities and complications in its density rather than resolving difference in its translucence. Here Du Bois's project no longer bears on an end; it turns on itself in search of the agency by which it can most thoroughly calculate the generation and effecting of representations. This generation displaces the speculative interests of science with the organization of the figurality of the mind or intelligence. What I mean is that intimated in all the Du Boisian angst over the incongruity of the subject-of-experience and the subject-of-knowledge is a notion of an altogether different subject: the subject-of-narrativity.