November 27, 2011

Prof. Tukufu Zuberi, Chair
Department of Sociology
University of Pennsylvania
128 McNeil Building
3718 Locust Walk
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6298

Dear Professor Zuberi,

In this letter I consider Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois's academic dossier in connection with his proposed appointment to the rank of Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

I am very familiar with Dr. Du Bois's dossier, in particular his extensive sociological writings, but also his historical work, his journalism, and his public service. I know of his teaching only by reputation, so I will not presume to comment on that aspect of his work, although it is certainly extensive. I am particularly aware of his theoretical and methodological contributions in the social sciences, particularly in sociology and history, so I shall concentrate my comments there. I shall also focus my remarks on the academic dimensions of Du Bois's long career, neglecting his unequalled activism on behalf of social justice, peace, and democracy. I make this choice solely in the interest of providing a review letter of reasonable length, knowing full well that Du Bois's activism could properly be considered under the heading of "service" to the profession, the academy, and the public.

In my view, among the voluminous products of Du Bois over seventy years(!) of active scholarship, research, and writing, two enormous achievements stand out above all others:

(1) Du Bois founded (or perhaps re-invented) the field of sociology, in the process assisting the relocating of the profession's "headquarters" and leadership from Europe to North America. He comprehensively reoriented the discipline toward the modern and scientific orientation it upholds today. He reframed sociology methodologically, transforming it into the empirically-oriented, primarily research-driven social scientific practice we know and take for granted in the present. Additionally he reworked the field theoretically, grounding it deeply in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. In bringing the quintessentially American and normatively democratic, realistic, and scientifically-based influence of pragmatism to the study of social relationships, social structures, and social identities, Du Bois was not merely transmitting the influence of his
teachers such as William James; he was in fact inventing the field of sociology and the social sciences more broadly. This is true because pragmatism, with its emphasis on agency, self-reflection, falsifiability, and the intelligibility of social relationships, remains definitive in social scientific thought and practice, and may be expected to remain so.

It must be added that while Du Bois did all these things, his achievements were not recognized until much later. Du Bois's breakthrough book, the text that established much of the paradigmatic approach I have just summarized, was his pioneering work The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. This work was undertaken while Du Bois was an under-ranked researcher at the University of Pennsylvania. It was published in 1899, but its accomplishments remained unacknowledged until after other scholars had recapitulated its insights and achievements, something that did not happen until three full decades later at the University of Chicago. Had Penn been "tuned-in" enough at the time to recognize the young treasure they had on their staff, they could perhaps have built a Duboisian "school," a sociology department that would have led the world. It is a pity that such an opportunity was missed.

It should also be noted that Du Bois's pioneering research was not limited to one book, even so extensively researched a masterwork as The Philadelphia Negro. Indeed, from his early career on he published a vast series of extensive sociological and historical studies that embodied the innovations I have discussed above: appearing in both the top social scientific journals like the Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science and the newly-founded American Journal of Sociology, taking the form of numerous scholarly research papers published through an institute Du Bois directed at Atlanta University, and also reaching out to the American public through the top literary journals of the epoch such as The Atlantic Monthly. Du Bois extended his visionary sociological and historical studies in every possible direction, both academic and popular.

(2) Du Bois invented the modern study of race and racism. His work on this vast subject shed light where previously a great deal of fear and ignorance prevailed. Indeed it was that fear and ignorance -- in my view and that of many other contemporary commentators -- that prevented him from receiving the recognition that such early work as The Philadelphia Negro surely merited, as I have noted. Yet, undeterred by the tremendous obstacles that he confronted, Du Bois carried his social scientific and pragmatist research program forward in a way that was radical for its time: he studied black people as self-conscious human beings. By refusing to dismiss or denigrate African Americans, Du Bois was able to document their experiences in all their variety and complexity, to chart the immense labors and unparalleled acts of collective self-invention that characterized the black journey from emancipation (beginning roughly in 1868, the year of Du Bois's birth) to civil rights (well underway in 1963, the year of Du Bois's death).

Among all the sociological and historical insights, both theoretical and empirical, that Du Bois was able to generate on the topics of race and racism, perhaps the greatest was the concept of "double consciousness," first presented in a series of articles that were collected in his classic text The Souls of Black Folk (1903). In this book Du Bois applies
his pragmatist methodology not only to the racial division of the country along the "color-line," but also to the divided identities of black people themselves. Living under despotic and coercive conditions, he argues, set off from whites by a "veil," a racial barrier simultaneously metaphorical and very concrete, black people developed divided identities: "an American, a Negro..., two warring souls in one dark body...." This "veil," this "double consciousness," was the first social scientifically effective analysis of racism and racism, the first convincing account offered from within a field all-too-often tainted by the very ignorance embedded in the subject-matter it was studying. Our understanding of race and racism today is still firmly rooted in Du Bois's insights -- more than a century after they were presented.

Of course, in this brief letter I cannot hope even to address the many applications of these concepts and the data they generated: for example Du Bois's extended research into the dynamics of African slavery and its aftermath, which led to one of the great books in American history and sociology, Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880 (1935). Nor can I address his engagement with imperial rule, notably in Africa but elsewhere as well, which gave rise to such momentous publications as "The African Roots of the War" (The Atlantic Monthly 1915). What I can say is that all this writing, and a great deal more that must go unmentioned, is of a piece: it follows a single social scientific program of study; and it addresses the "problem of the 20th century": the problem of the "color-line."

There is no doubt in my mind that W.E.B. Du Bois is the greatest sociologist, and the greatest exponent of Africana studies, that the United States has ever produced. Since he was at one time a member of the staff of the University of Pennsylvania, the University should now recognize -- however belatedly -- the great distinction that he and his work still embody. With this posthumous appointment process the University has a chance to transcend -- if not to undo -- the dishonor that it visited upon Du Bois with its refusal to accept his great work in 1899. It has the potential, albeit quite belatedly, to acknowledge its mistake in neglecting to appoint him to a professorship a century ago. It has a rare opportunity to repudiate its past capitulation to the negrophobia that existed in those days. By awarding him the title of Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies, Penn will take a great step in the right direction, welcoming back its prodigal son, and sharing in his immense glory at last.

I recommend this appointment unreservedly.

Sincerely,

Howard Winant
Professor of Sociology, UC Santa Barbara
Director, University of California Center for New Racial Studies