

Was There a Distinct “African American Sociology”?: Revisited

Vernon J. Williams, Jr.

As a scholar of Black studies in general and of the history of African Americans and European Americans in the social sciences in particular, I was struck with befuddlement by a superficially simple yet devilishly complex question: Why should one pursue my narrow line of work?

One might answer—I thought at one time—that the aforementioned project was essential purely for the well-rounded scholar’s edification. At other times, I thought, one might also answer that history can be instrumental in gauging how much progress the social sciences have made in diversifying the composition of their students and their theoretical and research concerns since their origins as academic disciplines in the United States of America at the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, as I once argued, one could even say that history could and should also demonstrate how retrograde the social sciences are in the above concerns (Williams, 1977).

Although all of the above responses should indeed merit further investigation for heuristic and reflective reasons, and emotions, it is my argument here that the study of the history of Black practitioners and Black subject matter in the social sciences is absolutely essential if the aforesaid sciences are truly to fulfill their fundamental *raison d’être* of creating a stable or rational social order. I would like to emphasize that only through inclusiveness and ecumenism will practitioners of the social sciences be capable of creating any semblance of a general theory of culture, society, and human behavior. It is perhaps the case, as Bert Flyvberg (2001) has argued, that any attempt on the part of the social sciences to “emulate natural science’s success in producing cumulative and predictive theory” is futile (166). Nevertheless, Flyvberg believes the social sciences can indeed contribute significantly to historical analyses, and discussions on values and interests are immeasurable—a task at which the natural sciences cannot possibly fulfill.

It should be noted that before 1970, however, the social sciences in general and sociology in particular had also failed miserably in elucidating the discussion of the pluralistic values of racial groups in general and Blacks in particular. Pointing out the stereotypes that had become cliché in mainstream sociology—and what for so many years had been countered by progressive anthropologists and historians—the late pluralist, novelist, and essayist Ralph Ellison (1965) said:

if a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists...who tell us that Negro life is thus and so in keeping with certain sociological theories, he is in trouble because he will abandon his task before he begins. If he accepts the cliché to the effect that the Negro family is usually a broken family, that it is matriarchal in form and the mother dominates and castrates the males; if he believes Negro males are having all of these alleged troubles with their sexuality, or that Harlem is a “Negro ghetto” with piss in the halls and blood on the stairs, he’ll never see the people of whom he wishes to write (730).

In reference to Ellison’s comments, the distinguished sociologist of African-American institutional life, Andrew Billingsley, concurred in the former’s remarks when he wrote in 1968, “Negro families have been mistreated, ignored, and distorted in American scholarship” (3). “Unfortunately,” he continued, “social scientists and other students of group life as well as the

mass media have helped to perpetuate this distortion” (3). Nevertheless, Billingsley’s insider perspective enabled him almost to dismiss Ellison’s categorization that *all* sociologists were biased, for he wrote, “As harsh and accurate as is Ellison’s view of the general treatment of Negro families, it is not the universal view, nor is the condition he describes a necessary part of the sociological perspective. A number of social scientists are beginning to approach the Negro experience with new lenses and to view it and describe it in its own right, and in much of its variation and complexity” (4). Recently, in debunking Ellison’s critique of social scientists, Richard H. King (2004) observed that “if social scientists lose the character and texture of life as they develop their abstract models of society, the literary/culture approach of Ellison... fails to do justice to the institutional and structural constraints on individual and group expression” (302-303).

It is important to note, however, that Ellison did not deny that some sociologists’ clichés in reference to African-American culture contained some truth when he admitted in 1944 that “much of Negro culture might be negative.” He nevertheless argued in the same article that “there is also much of great value, of richness, which because it has been secreted by the living and has made their lives more meaningful, Negroes will not be disregarded” (340). Thus, when the full-scaled attack took place in the context of American universities’ volatile racial climate in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some prominent African-American students of sociology criticized mainstream sociology for neglecting the heroic stance of their groups’ progenitors—that is, those African-American sociologists who founded the African-American sociological tradition.

In 1971, the late historian and sociologist of Africana studies, Rhett S. Jones, penned a pioneering article for the now-defunct *Black Academy Review* (1971), in which he stated that Black sociologists sought to promote “peculiar kinds of scholars, for black scholars were expected to have all the attributes of white scholars and at the same time be devoted to social reform” (52). Furthermore, “all were committed to the application of sociological knowledge for the benefit of the black community” (52). Yet, Jones was too good a scholar to write cant and admitted that during the years from 1890 to 1917 it was “generally agreed” that “the goal of sociology should be the construction of a better society for all men, and like their White colleagues, they very much believed in progress. Like White sociologists, Blacks also believed that sociology “had to concern itself with social problems” (53). (Jones could have added that most African-American sociologists, like most European-American sociologists, also embraced the perspective, as Craig Calhoun (2007) has pointed out, that their respective ethnic and racial groups and society were evolving in the direction of higher types or forms of cooperation and fellow-feeling.) Jones thus concluded his article in a somewhat equivocal fashion:

Black sociologists developed a different type [of sociology], for they occupied a different position in the social structure. Their position in the society did not, however, enable them to fully escape the beliefs and expectations of white sociology. There was a black sociology, in the sense that the interests and experience were quite different from those of whites. There was no black sociology in the sense that most black sociologists wanted to accept the beliefs of white society and white sociology (64).

Jones’s article was printed two years before Howard University professor Joyce A. Ladner’s classic anthology, *The Death of White Sociology* (1973), was published by Random House. It was a volume that Jonathan Scott Halloway (2006), an historian of African-American

social sciences, called “an advocacy that recognized the humanity and complexity of [African Americans’] experience” (237). Holloway believed that Ladner “wanted to call attention to the fact that the sociological discourse would no longer go unchallenged” (357). “This was also scholarship,” the precocious Yale University professor concluded in his characteristic hyperbolic language, “that angrily denounced the idea that blacks were a people without a past” (237).

Be that as it may, Ladner’s criticism of mainstream sociology’s present, in retrospect, was not as defiant as one might think. Ladner was certainly strident in her convictions—in reference to the fact that African-American sociologists held a unique position in American society in the 1970s—that they “were influenced intellectually by the Black culture and ‘awareness thrust,’ and that some of them sought to understand and interpret this phenomenon as sociologists” (xx). Yet, despite all of the subsequent polemical fanfare that immediately followed the publication of Ladner’s volume, and that still persists to this day, it has usually been ignored that at the time she admitted, “because Black sociology is an outgrowth of, and reaction to mainstream sociology, it is impossible to divorce the two” (xx).

Jones’s and Ladner’s pieces raise provocative questions: was there a distinct “African American sociology” prior to the late 1960s? If that was the case, one would assume that the knowledge that African Americans produced was influenced by the social fact of their unique position in American society.

Once again we return to Ellison (1944), who sought to abort any potential notion of an African-American sociological exceptionalism in its womb when he stated that

the positive contribution of Dr. [Robert Ezra] Park and those connected with him are well-established. American Negroes have benefited greatly from their research; and some of the most brilliant Negro scholars have been connected with them. Perhaps the most just charge to be made against them is that of timidity. They have been, in the negative sense, victims of the imposed limitations of bourgeois science (307).

In contradistinction to Ellison, Richard Wright (1948) argued that Park’s students could not be accused of timidity, for Park and his colleagues “were not afraid to urge their students to trust their feelings for a situation or an event, were not afraid to stress the role of insight, and to warn against a slavish devotion to figures, charts, and sterile scientific techniques” (xix). Complimenting Wright upon meeting him for the first time, an aging Park stated, “I want to shake hands with a great writer. I don’t agree with much that you write, but it is honest and great writing” (quoted in Raushenbush, 178).

Despite the hyperbole of Ellison’s Communist rhetoric and Wright’s remarks notwithstanding, Ellison anticipated the claims of later historians of sociology. For both the late Stow Persons (1987) and I (1989) minimized any differences in conceptual constructs between African-American sociologists and their progressive, European-American colleagues. Although hostile to the work of the above authors, so, too, did James B. McKee (1992). Put another way, all of us assumed that European Americans dictated the explanatory theoretical concepts upon which pre-Myrdal African-American scholars drew.

It is hardly surprising that Ladner (1973) included as the lead essay a piece by John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, extolling “Park’s advocacy of detached scientific studies,” which they thought “was very attractive to men like [Charles S.] Johnson and [E. Franklin] Frazier” (12). In essence, the authors mentioned above helped perpetuate disciplinary myth most recently voiced by the Briton Michael Banton (2008) when he said:

In the early twentieth century USA it was generally believed that the kinds of social relations possible between blacks and whites were restricted by inherited biological differences. Park's generation of social scientists overturned this assumption, establishing that these relations were social rather than biological in character. Their distinctiveness derived from the whites' use of a folk concept of race to classify people (212).

Banton's assertion that Park's "generation of social scientists overturned" the assumption that "the kinds of social relationships possible between blacks and whites" were purportedly "restricted by inherited biological differences" was sheer poppycock. For Ellison pointed out as early as 1944 that Park's concept of a distinctive, Negro racial temperament was a "descriptive metaphor...pregnant with mixed motives as to birth a thousand compromises and indecision." "Imagine," he continued, "the effect such teachings have had upon Negro students alone" (332). In fact, Ellison had attended Tuskegee Institute from 1932 and 1936 and was the victim of what he wrote was "the humiliation of being taught [that concept of the racial temperament] in a class in sociology" (17). Ellison observed that "the Negro instructor passed [the concept] blandly along to us without even bothering to wash his hands, much less his teeth" (17).

In 1971, the late Stanford M. Lyman, one of the twentieth century's most creative, humanistic sociological theorists and a leading authority on Park, pointed out astutely that embedded in Park's theory of assimilation were two racial concepts—the concept of a Black racial temperament and the concept of an "instinctive racial prejudice," which had their origins in the writings of his colleague William I. Thomas—that Park, before 1939, treated as obstacles to the assimilation of African Americans. The present author concurred in Lyman's argument in 1989 and in 1992 and wrote—despite the arguments of Barbara Ballis Lal (1990)—that Park and his generation, including sociologists such as Charles H. Cooley, William I. Thomas, and W. E. B. Du Bois—were transitional figures, caught between racial determination and the trends towards initiating a cultural and social determinism. Their thought on the character and capabilities of African Americans was uneven. McKee buttressed my assessment when he argued that some sociologists before 1930 were "floating between" racial determinism and cultural determinism (55-102). Recently, Sarah Daynes and Orville Lee (2008), in reference to Horace Kallen, Du Bois, and Park, argued that "all three take race to be, in the first instance, a matter of biological constitution and, in the second instance, to be more significant at the level of culture" (32). Thus, Daynes and Lee concluded that for Park and his contemporaries, "biological differences are real...even if [the aforementioned thinkers] circumscribe the efficacy of purely biological accounts of race; these accounts are affirmed rather than refuted" (32).

In contrast to Banton, on the one hand, and Daynes and Lee, on the other, the historically minded sociologist of the Chicago School, Martin Bulmer (1984), has asserted that Park "through his interest in ethnic groups was free from many of the conventional prejudices at that time" (215). Furthermore, as Winifred Raushenbush (1979) demonstrated, most of Park's African Americans attested to a virtual absence of racial prejudice in his guidance of them. Charles S. Johnson remarked that when he met Park the second time during his graduate studies at the University of Chicago, "it dawned on me that I was being taken seriously and without the usual condescension or oily paternalism" (101). Williams O. Brown wrote: "Park was the greatest intellectual influence in my life... All of us...had great respect for him coupled with a pride in being his students. I sometimes found him irascible but never mean. He was never familiar with his students, but he respected them, he understood them, above all he was

interested in them. He always respected you as a person” (103). Horace Cayton was awed by Park’s knowledge in reference to African Americans. “[Park] was a white man, but he probably knew more about the American Negro than anyone in the country” (176). Nevertheless, the Young Turk disagreed with Park’s *laissez faire* economic ideology:

On one occasion I drove him and Mrs. Park from Fisk to New York on a Christmas holiday. As we were driving through New Jersey, near the end of our journey, Park and I got into an argument about the capitalistic system. From an economic point of view, Park was conservative, if not reactionary. The argument got hotter and hotter and he finally told me to stop the car and get out (it was his car). I answered just as warmly that it was three below zero and that he, Park, couldn’t drive a car and that I wasn’t going to get out (176).

It would not be an overstatement to argue that Park left an ambiguous legacy that has been reflected in scholarly writing by sociologists since the 1970s. Nonetheless, one should emphasize that at the end of his life, Park remarked:

Democracy is not something that some people in a country can have and others not have, something to be shared and divided like a pie—some getting a small and some getting a large piece. Democracy is an integral thing. If any part of the country doesn’t have it, the rest of the country doesn’t have it. The Negro, therefore, in fighting for democracy for himself is simply fighting the battle for our democracy (177).

It should thus come as no surprise that Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake dedicated their monumental work on Blacks in Chicago, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), to “the late Professor Robert E. Park... American Scholar and Friend of the Negro People” (vi).

Drake and Cayton could effuse such fulsome praise for Park after his death; for, as Lyman and I demonstrated, Park, by 1939, had discarded the concepts of a distinctive Negro racial temperament and an instinctive prejudice from his theory of assimilation. An obvious question arises: Why did Park extirpate the anomalies from his theory?

There are several possible explanations for the fruition of Park’s 1939 theory. E. Franklin Frazier (1947) offered one explanation when he raised his mentor to paradigmatic stature and suggested that as Park witnessed the inexorable ebb and flux of social forces, his superior intellect enabled him to develop new insights, and, as a result, Park astutely altered his theory. Another explanation suggests that internal developments—that is, the rational discourse that determines rigor of contested concepts in the discipline of sociology—had prevailed by the late 1930s (Stephan, 1982; Stocking, 1968). A third explanation states that the external social and political pressures and the ethnic and racial origins of young sociologists who were emerging as authorities in the discipline created a new paradigm (Harris, 1999, 1968; Lieberman, 1975). Splitting the difference between the two latter explanations, I argued in the following manner in 1989:

The ascendancy of the assimilationist perspective in American sociology was undoubtedly related to developments both outside and within the discipline. The origins of an active black protest movement demanding the full integration of blacks into the

American mainstream, the social, educational, and economic progress, and the fact that blacks were a political force to be reckoned in the North convinced many sociologists there were strong currents that would change the attitudes and behavior of both blacks and whites. Within the discipline of sociology, the emergence of blacks and members of Other minority groups, some of whom were activists during their youth, as authorities in race relations no doubt affected the attitudes of the sociological community (173).

Yet, there is another possible explanation. Writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, Professor Pierre Saint-Arnaud (2009) of the University of Laval exhumed the relationship of Charles S. Johnson's and especially E. Franklin Frazier's scholarly and popular writings to those of Robert Ezra Park's. Saint-Arnaud's smoking-gun assertions were inferential, especially when he argued that Park used "a feint in his later work, in which the meticulous class analysis of Johnson and Frazier was drawn upon *without citation*" (248). Indeed, it should be emphasized that Frazier (1947) had stated, "Park saw the changes which were occurring in the United States and other parts of the world, he modified his theory of race relations [to] account [for] these changes. His latest theory of race relations in the modern world took into account the dynamic elements in the situation. It remains for [Park's] students and other scholars to make a more precise formulation of these theories through research and reflection" (40). Be this as it may, for Saint-Arnaud the crux of the matter resided in the fact that early African-American sociologists sought

[t]o avoid melting into the stigmatizing image of blacks disseminated by nearly all the Anglo-American founders of sociology, the first black social scientists—or at any rate the boldest among them—adopted an ideology that denounced the established social order and pointed the way for their community to take its rightful place in America's past and future. Here ideology appears not as a factor in the genesis of science but as a necessary instrument for converting the tragic historical episode of slavery into a rational striving for collective self-affirmation—in a phrase, the conquest of freedom through knowledge (8).

It is tragic, however, to note that individuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Monroe N. Work, Charles S. Johnson, and E. Franklin Frazier—persons who made substantial contributions to the subtradition of African-American sociology—could not, at the historical junctures in which they made their most significant contributions, convert whatever limited, individual agency they possessed into a collective agency for Black liberation.

It should also be added that those men owed a tremendous debt to a man whom some irreverent, pubescent undergraduates here in the state of Indiana refer to as "Booker," a mulatto, former male slave, who had the nerve to hire a scuffling, erstwhile White newspaper reporter who helped formulate a dream that had lost much of its essential meaning. Indeed, Du Bois, Work, Johnson, and Frazier created a "distinct African American sociology" that appropriated some of Park's formulations. They sowed the seeds for a triumphant civil rights movement, which has now perhaps run its full course. Thus, the provocative statement that the historian James T. Patterson (2010) utilized in the title of his book on the plight of African-American families, "freedom is not enough," emanates from the illogic that full freedom has been achieved—or some such nonsense.

Enough said.

This article was originally delivered at the American Sociological Association meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, on August 17, 2010. The paper was subsequently published in the Western Journal of Black Studies, volume 35, in the winter of 2011. The version in this issue has been revised and rewritten.

Vernon J. Williams, Jr., is a professor of African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. His publications include From a Caste to a Minority (1989); Rethinking Race (1997); and The Social Sciences and Theories of Race (2006).

References

- Banton, M. (2008). "Review of *The Social Sciences and Theories of Race*, by Vernon J. Williams, Jr." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31: 211-212.
- Billingsley, A. (1968). *Black Families in White America*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bulmer, M. (1984). *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociological Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Calhoun, C. (2007). "Sociology in America: An Introduction." In Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Sociology in America: A History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Daynes, S., and Lee, O. (2008). *Desire for Race*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellison, R. (1965, 2003). "A Very Stern Discipline." In John F. Callahan (ed.), *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Flyvberg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Frazier, E. F. (1947, 1968). "Sociological Theory and Race Relations." In G. F. Edwards (ed.), *E. Franklin Frazier on Race Relations: Selected Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, M. (1999). *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times*. Walnut Creek, CA: ALTAMIRA
- _____. (1968). *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.
- Holloway, J. S. (2006). "The Black Scholar, the Humanities, and the Politics of Racial Knowledge since 1945." In D. A. Hollinger (ed.), *The Humanities and the Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 217-246.
- Jones, R. S. (1971). "Black Sociology, 1890-1917." *Black Academy Review* 2: 43-66.
- King, R. H. (2004). *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press.
- Ladner, J. A. (ed). (1973). *The Death of White Sociology: Essays on Race and Culture*. New York: Random House.
- Lal, B. B. (1990). *The Romance of Culture in an Urban Civilization: Robert E. Park on Race and Ethnic Relations in Cities*. London: Routledge.
- Lieberman, L. (1975). "The Debate over Race: A Study in the Sociology of Knowledge." In A. Montagu (ed.), *Race and IQ*. New York: Oxford University Press, 127-141.
- Lyman, S. M. (1971). *The Black American in Sociological Thought: A Failure of Perspective*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Matthews, F. H. (1977). *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School*. Montreal: McGill-Queens Press.

- McKee, J. B. (1992). *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Patterson, J. T. (2010). *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life, from LBJ to Obama*. New York: Basic Books.
- Persons, S. (1987). *Ethnic Studies at Chicago*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Rauschenbush, W. (1979). *Robert E. Park: Biography of a Sociologist*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Saint-Arnaud, P. (2009). *African American Pioneers of Sociology: A Critical History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Stephan, N. L. (1982). *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960*. Hamden, UK: Macmillan.
- Stocking, G. W. (1968). *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.
- Williams, V. J. (1989). *From a Caste to a Minority: Changing Attitudes of American Sociologists Toward Afro-Americans, 1896-1945*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- _____. (1977). "The Afro-American in American Sociological Literature." Dissertation. Providence: Brown University.
- Wright, R. (1948). "Introduction." In St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (eds.), *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3-29.