

Nineteenth century criminal geography: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Pennsylvania Prison Society



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Amy Kaplan writes of W.E.B. Du Bois's 1915 essay 'The African Roots of War' that 'by grounding his inquiry in Africa, [he] exposes the way the representations of space and time have been structured by imperial maps and narratives of the world, and from this location he draws alternative maps and writes new histories'.¹ But Du Bois begins drawing alternative maps and writing new histories more than fifteen years earlier in *The Philadelphia Negro*. With the support of the University of Pennsylvania, Du Bois moved to Philadelphia's Seventh Ward in August of 1896 to begin his survey of its black residents.² The aim of *The Philadelphia Negro* was to 'present the results of an inquiry ... into the condition of the forty thousand or more people of Negro blood now living in the city of Philadelphia', and to 'ascertain something of the geographical distribution of this race, their occupations and daily life, their homes, their organizations, and above all, their relation to their million white fellow-citizens'.³

Du Bois organizes the social geography of Philadelphia's black Seventh Ward according to several classes: the middle and upper

classes, the working class, the poor, and the vicious and criminal classes.⁴ In his assessment, space is both produced by and productive of historical processes: racism accounts, at least in part, for the segregation of African Americans into slum districts; poverty, living conditions, and the availability of work and transportation in these districts then produce their own lasting social and subjective effects. Du Bois often relies on positivist social science methods that, while providing valuable demographic information, also have 'the tendency to treat race as a "proper object" that can be quantified, mapped and located'.⁵ By 1896, however, Du Bois had already developed complex insights about the cultural and subjective aspects of race and race relations in the United States, and these insights emerge in important ways in *The Philadelphia Negro* (Figs. 1–2).

Of particular interest to the current analysis is the way Du Bois frames his social classification scheme around the phenomenon of crime, and I contend that the location of Du Bois's study is central to his treatment of crime and criminality. Philadelphia was the site of the first jails and prisons in the United States as well as prevailing discourses on penology and penal reform. The Pennsylvania Prison Society, originally the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, was formed in 1787 to address the dire conditions of the city's Walnut Street Jail and to promote the humane treatment of incarcerated people. Its members included well

⁴ Du Bois, *Philadelphia Negro*, facing page 60. See Fig. 1. Recent scholarship demonstrates a deep divide between those who continue to view racial segregation in terms similar to Du Bois and those who see a marked improvement in the spatial organization of and living conditions in the inner city. E. Anderson, for example, argues that Du Bois's typology is no longer relevant, given the immense gains in social and public policy made by black Americans during the twentieth century. W.J. Wilson believes that the increased focus on positive changes in public policy during the 1990s has led to a dearth of geographical and public policy scholarship on continuing manifestations of racial oppression. Others, like D.S. Massey and N.A. Denton, demonstrate how contemporary American class structure continues to be shaped along the lines of Du Bois's typology. E. Anderson, The emerging Philadelphia African American class structure, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (2000) 54–77; W.J. Wilson, The political and economic forces shaping concentrated poverty, *Political Science Quarterly* 123 (2008–09) 555–571; D.S. Massey and N.A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Cambridge, 1993.

⁵ A. Nayak, Geography, race and emotions: social and cultural intersections, *Social and Cultural Geography* 12 (2011) 150.

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¹ A. Kaplan, *Anarchy of Empire*, Cambridge, 2002, 171.

² Du Bois's time in Philadelphia is well-documented. He was among the first African American scholars to find somewhat broad support in the American academy, and the fiscal support for *The Philadelphia Negro* by the University of Pennsylvania helped to legitimate Du Bois's contribution to American scholarship. During his year in Philadelphia, Du Bois worked from the College Settlement House, formerly St. Mary Street College Settlement, located at 617 St. Mary Street, and lived at the Settlement's kitchen and coffee house and library building at 701 Lombard Street.

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, Philadelphia, 1996 [1899], 1.

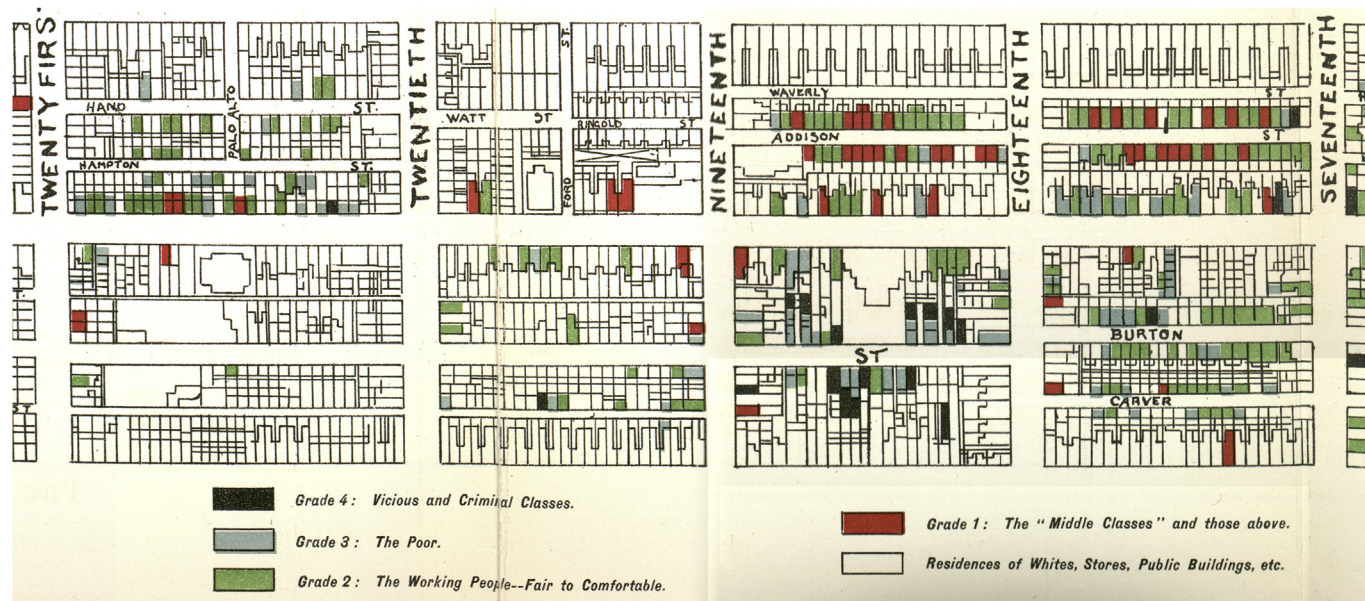


Fig. 1. The Seventh Ward of Philadelphia.

Source: Reproduced courtesy of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries, 'The Seventh Ward of Philadelphia: The Distribution of Negro Inhabitants throughout the Ward and their Social Condition'.

respected citizens and political thinkers, and it played a central role in shaping public discourse about crime and punishment. In this essay, I read *The Philadelphia Negro* alongside Du Bois's earlier and contemporary writings about the sociology of race, as well as some of the principal insights disseminated by the Pennsylvania Prison Society, to demonstrate how Du Bois offers, within the context of these discourses, a nascent alternative to normative inducements to reduce crime.

Prison studies scholarship has, particularly in the last decade, emerged as an important critique of the way that capitalism has functioned systematically to segregate, disenfranchise, and otherwise oppress Americans of color. Recent scholarship has established that the black inner city experiences disproportionate policing and surveillance, and that its residents are disproportionately arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for crimes that statistical data show are committed at approximately the same rates by whites.⁶ As one of the primary governmental institutions with which people of color interact, 'criminal justice "teaches" race in more subtle and complex ways than previous regimes'.⁷ Urban geographers have long grappled with the relationship between race, class, and residential segregation, and geography has been of central concern in recent decades to legal theorists studying racial

injustice.⁸ Recent academic literature on Du Bois has demonstrated the lasting importance of *The Philadelphia Negro* for understanding race as a biological, social, and epistemological category;⁹ the relationship between identity, race, class, and economy;¹⁰ and Du Boisian praxis for resolving social problems and promoting political participation.¹¹ I argue that Du Bois's urban geography exposes some of the historical precedents for contemporary trends in residential segregation, mass incarceration, and other forms of spatial exploitation and marginalization, as well as how these processes shape identity.

A reading of Du Bois that pays increased attention to organizations of community and everyday practices can shed additional light not only on the historical development and contemporary manifestations of ongoing structural racism, but also on alternative possibilities for responding to that oppression. Prison studies and other scholarship addressing mass incarceration often remain centered at the level of the operations of these systems, rather than at the level of how individuals and communities respond to, resist, or reshape these systems.¹² Race is performed in and through space, and it is performed differently in criminal spaces, for

⁶ M. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York, 2012.

⁷ A.E. Lerman and V.M. Weaver, *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control*, Chicago, 2014, 24.

⁸ P. Jackson (Ed), *Race and Racism: Essays in Social Geography*, New York, 1987; J.R. Logan and B.J. Stults, Racial and ethnic separation in the neighborhoods: a first look at changes since 2000, census brief prepared for Project US2010; J.R. Logan, B.J. Stults, and R. Farley, Segregation of minorities in the metropolis: two decades of change, *Demography* 41 (2004) 1–22; Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*; D.S. Massey, J. Rothwell, and T. Domina, The changing bases of segregation in the United States, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 626 (2009) 74–90. For prison studies research concerned with geography, in addition to Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, see H.M. Osofsky, The geography of justice wormholes: dilemmas from property and criminal law, *Villanova Law Review* 117 (2008), *LexisNexis*; see the special issue of *Law and Contemporary Social Issues* 66 (2003) entitled 'The political geography of race data in the criminal justice system'.

⁹ F.L.C. Jackson, Anthropological measurement: the mismeasure of African Americans, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 154–171; A. Monteiro, Being an African in the world: the Du Boisian epistemology, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 220–234; T. Zuberi, Deracializing social statistics: problems in the quantification of race, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 172–185.

¹⁰ G.D. Jaynes, Identity and economic performance, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 128–139.

¹¹ M.B. Katz, Race, poverty, and welfare: Du Bois's legacy for policy, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 111–127; L.T. Outlaw, W.E.B. Du Bois on the study of social problems, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 281–297; W.J. Wilson, Rising inequality and the case for coalition politics, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 568 (2000) 78–99.

¹² D. Garland (Ed), *Mass Imprisonment: Its Social Causes and Consequences*, Thousand Oaks, 2001; B. Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, Thousand Oaks, 2006; B. Western and C. Wildeman, The black family and mass incarceration, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009) 221–242.

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