1987 Politics and Historical Archaeology: The View from the W. E. B. Du Bois Site

Robert Paynter

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/robert_paynter/28/
Archaeological "Objectivity in Interpretation"

VOLUME 2

The World Archaeological Congress
1-7 September 1986
Southampton and London
Patron: H.R.H. The Prince of Wales

ALLEN & UNWIN

Issued in association with Allen & Unwin, the principal publishers of books arising from the World Archaeological Congress.
The Politics of the past

Organiser: Peter Gathercole
Dean
Darwin College
Cambridge

CONTENTS

--- Archaeology and Politics

Ilores Root, Brattleboro Museum and Art Centre, Vermont

---

Peter Gathercole
The Congress that never was -- and its aftermath

---

Sharon Pay
The Legacy of Eve: towards a discussion of the interpretation of women's past experience with reference to current research practice and the presentation of the past to the public

---

Regional Emphases: 1 Africa and North America

---

Stephen O'Regan, Aoraki Consultant Services, Wellington

---

The development of museums in Botswana: dilemmas and tensions in a front-line state

---

Neglect as policy: ten years of deadlock: museums and government in Botswana

---

Cultural education in West Africa: the archaeological perspectives

---

The epic of the Ekpu: ancestor figures of Oron, southeast Nigeria
The Politics of the past

Organiser: Peter Gathercole
Dean
Darwin College
Cambridge

CONTENTS

Preface

Section A — Archaeology and Politics

Chair: Dolores Root, Brattleboro Museum and Art Centre, Vermont

Peter Gathercole The Congress that never was — and its aftermath
Sian Jones & Sharon Pay The Legacy of Eve: towards a discussion of the interpretation of women's past experience with reference to current research practice and the presentation of the past to the public

Section B — Regional Emphases: 1 Africa and North America

Chair: Stephen O'Regan, Aoraki Consultant Services, Wellington

Robert MacKenzie The development of museums in Botswana: dilemmas and tensions in a front-line state
Sandy Grant Neglect as policy: ten years of deadlock: museums and government in Botswana
Nwanna Nzewunwa Cultural education in West Africa: the archaeological perspectives
Keith Nicklin The epic of the Ekpu: ancestor figures of Oron, southeast Nigeria
Chair: Helga Seeden, Department of History and Archaeology, American University of Beirut

Frank Willett  Museums: two case studies of reaction to colonialism

Carl Kuttruff  Fort Loudoun, Tennessee, a mid-eighteenth century British fortification: a case study in research archaeology, reconstruction, and interpretive exhibits

Robert Paynter  Politics and historical archaeology: the view from the W E B DuBois site

Michael Blakey  American nationality and ethnicity in the depicted past

Section C — Regional Emphases: 2 Oceania and Australia

Chair: Helga Seeden, Department of History and Archaeology, American University of Beirut

Lawrence Foanaota  Archaeology and museum work in Solomon Islands

Andrew Marenge & John Normu  History of the West New Britain Cultural Centre

Sergio Rapu  Fifty years of conservation of cultural property on Easter Island

David J Butts  Nga Taonga o Ngati Kahungunu: the treasures of Ngati Kahungunu

Stephen O'Regan  Maori control of Maori heritage

Phillip Gordon  A museum's role in Aboriginal society today

Howard Creamer  Aboriginal perceptions of the past — the implications for cultural resource management in Australia

Section D — Regional Emphases: 3 Europe; and:
The Media and Archaeology

Chair: David Lowenthal, Department of Geography, University College London

SECTION B

Regional Emphases: 1 Africa and North America

Chair: Stephen O'Regan, Aoraki Consultant Services, Wellington

Robert MacKenzie  The development of museums in Botswana: dilemmas and tensions in a front-line state

Sandy Grant  Neglect as policy: ten years of deadlock: museums and government in Botswana

Nwanna Nzewunwa  Cultural education in West Africa: the archaeological perspectives

Keith Nicklin  The epic of the Ekpu: ancestor figures of Oron, southeast Nigeria

Frank Willett  Museums: two case studies of reaction to colonialism

Carl Kuttruff  Fort Loudoun, Tennessee, a mid-eighteenth century British fortification: a case study in research archaeology, reconstruction, and interpretive exhibits

Robert Paynter  Politics and historical archaeology: the view from the W E B DuBois site

Michael Blakey  American 'nationality and ethnicity in the depicted past
POLITICS AND HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: THE VIEW FROM THE W. E. B. DU BOIS SITE

ROBERT PAYNE

Introduction

How does politics impress itself upon Afro-American archaeology and how does Afro-American archaeology shape politics? If the question lacks, for many archaeologists, the impact to be minimal, in fact the lesser the impact the better. However, in the States, by simply adding the adjective "Afro-American" it seems inescapable that politics need be considered. This is because racism is one of the dominant problem characteristics of the United States' political economy, and because this problem is made self-conscious with the charged phrases "Afro-American" and "Black". More than neutral descriptors, these words signify an attitude towards the problem of the color line, namely an attitude of minority empowerment.

In the following I discuss some issues surrounding politics and Afro-American archaeology as they arise from work at the W. E. B. Du Bois site in Western Massachusetts. The political dimension, I will argue, is inescapable regarding our theory, data and the use of our results. I will make this argument by setting some of the contexts for our investigations.

Contexts

The site was the boyhood home and later in life vacation home of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Du Bois was one of the most important scholar-activists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and today, one of the least well known. Born in the Western Massachusetts rural-commercial town of Great Barrington in 1868, he died in Ghana in 1963 at the age of 95, a remarkable life span in the history of Afro-America, virtually from slavery through Jim Crow to the modern Civil Rights Movement. Living this period, an Afro-American would make Du Bois an important source on American history. He was much more than a source.

The list of firsts is so long that I am sure to omit many, but let me mention a few to provide a sense of his significance (Levin 1971). He received the first Ph.D. awarded by Harvard to an African-American, and studied at the University of Berlin. His dissertation, The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870, was the first number in Harvard's Historical Series. His study, The Philadelphia Negro, is the first study in scientific sociology and arguably the first urban ethnography done of African-Americans. He was one of the initial participants in the Niagara Movement which set the agenda for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, of which Du Bois was a founding member. From 1910 to 1934 he was the influential editor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's magazine, The Crisis. He authored more than 20 books and numerous articles and collections. He is best known among Afro-Americans for his eloquent critique of Booker T. Washington's limited vision of black freedom in The Souls of Black Folk as well as his two autobiographies written in his seventieth and ninetieth years. In the white community he is known as a Communist agitator bound by McCarthy for his vision of world peace, Pan-African unity and forging a link between the clan and race struggle in a distinctive and cogent Black radicalism (Robinson 1983).

In short, Du Bois spent his life giving a distinctive shape to the United States and the world's struggle with racism. As in any good historical-archaeological study, reading the documents helps create the context for understanding the material culture. The documents on and by Du Bois make it impossible to divorce an understanding of the material world of himself and his family from the conditions of American racism. Thus, politics has to enter into our understanding of this site.

I would not stop with Du Bois, however. Du Bois was a genius, a prolific genius, and provides us with a unique insight into the society of the past and our society of today. And his message, that Afro-Americans are best understood from the perspective of struggle in which they built creative and productive lives in the face of violent racism, applies to folks as much as to geniuses. Thus, the interpretation of any Afro-American site requires appreciating the politics of remembrance as practiced under American slavery and American apartheid (Blakely 1983; Perry n.d.).

It is not just the personal context of Du Bois's life that makes politics an integral part of the study of the Du Bois site. In addition, the theoretical frameworks we bring to bear on understanding racially divided societies indirectly introduce the politics of the present into our study of the past. This point can be made by briefly considering the theoretical perspectives that guide recent research on Afro-American historical archaeology.

Three basic perspectives guide work on Afro-Americans: the diffusionist position, the status position, and the race-class position. The diffusionist position is exemplified by Deetz's (1977:138-154) proposal of a distinctive Afro-American mindset governing the material culture of Afro-American sites. The Afro-American mindset and associated material culture stands in marked contrast to the structures underlying white culture and material culture. For instance, Deetz proposes that Afro-American buildings are built on a different basic spatial unit than are white buildings, that ceramic assemblages of Afro-Americans reflect lower socioeconomic status and African survivals, that Afro-American settlements are clustered around males, and that Afro-Americans engaged in distinctive foodways. Though not explicitly discussed, Deetz leaves
Racism is not explicitly addressed from this approach, yet its origins are evident. That the white mind-set and the Afro-American mind-set are never in one another is a function of the society that moved Afro-Americans and Northwest Europeans to the North American continent. Those who dominate blacks results in an impoverishment of the surface features characterized the material assemblages, but has little effect on the deep structure of Afro-American culture. And, these different mind-sets may contribute to a failure of communication, overt and covert, between members of these groups, thereby providing the basis for deleterious stereotypes. But the mechanics of the differences are fundamentally those of diffusion. Cultural differences arise from geographic isolation. Even when geographic isolation is eliminated, there is a certain conservatism in culture that results in continued differences due to the different workings of the deep structures. Thus, the fundamental factor in coping with racism is that whites and Afro-Americans participate in basically different cultures.

The second approach to Afro-American archeology is the status approach (e.g., Geisler 1982; Schuyler 1980). The status approach agrees that white material culture and Afro-American material culture are different, but disagrees with regards to the mechanisms of differentiation. Rather than deriving from deep cultural differences, the differences derive from the position of groups within a hierarchical society. Positions in the hierarchy result in different life chances and experiences. The mechanisms in North American society distributing these positions are the market and racial prejudice. A racially structured society results from excluding Afro-Americans from upper echelons in this hierarchy by allowing prejudice to distort the operation of the market. With the reduction of this prejudice, market forces would integrate Afro-Americans into the society by differentiating them into rich and poor. Racism is not endemic in the hierarchical social order but a transient result of historical circumstances. Race and ethnicity are thus very similar histori- cal distortions, and racial categories can be expected to dissolve just as did ethnic categories. Race persists, not because of the isolation due to different mind-sets, but because of distorted interactions with mainstream social institutions, especially the market.

A third position in a race-class perspective, exemplified in the work of Bower (1985), Ferguson (1985), and Otto (1984). The basic argument is that racial differentiation is a fundamental category used to assign people to qualitatively differentiated access to strategic resources. This differentiation is necessary to extract surpluses from the population by dividing groups against themselves. The effectiveness of the differentiation is limited due to the fact that the different positions in society form the material basis for a distinct way of life that can lead to effective resistance to the extraction of social surpluses. Thus over time, the color line persists even if the specific terms shift, since it is fundamental in how the rich get rich, but also in how some poor survive. Racial categories thereby arise out of the basic interactions of the social order and these distinctions should persist unless there is a change in the political economy.

The race-class position shares a bit of each of the previous formulations but ultimately presents a different perspective on society. For instance, as with the status approach, the race-class approach looks to the way people interact with the market — indirectly as slaves or directly as wage earners and consumers — and sees racism arising from these material factors. However, unlike the status position more than the market is responsible for the distinctive lifeways of people in capitalist society — a position closer to that of the diffusionist argument. In particular, the cultural material of the African past is used to construct viable communities in the face of a virulent racism seeking to divide white against black. Racial categories, in the race-class approach, are fundamental characteristics of the operation of North American capitalism, and not the result of the relative isolation of groups or some aberrant distortion of the system's market.

The history of research on Afro-American sites is so recent that good data is not available to evaluate these positions. And conducting a definitive evaluation is not my present goal. Instead, I want to point out that these supposedly different scientific theories are quite similar to theories that guide policy making on the race issue in the contemporary United States, that they are fundamentally political.

There are basically three types of social theories of racism. A fourth theory is not social and is not shared by any of the positions mentioned in historical archeology, namely the biological reductionist theory that blacks are innately inferior culture creators than whites. Since this palatable false theory plays no role in the above mentioned theories, I give it no further discussion.

The three social theories are the cartel theory, the market theory, and the radical theory (Gordon 1977: 142-150; Reich 1981). All three consider racism within a capitalist, market economy, though they have different perspectives on persisting and policies that might dissolve racism. The cartel theory views all whites benefitting from association with whites and from excluding blacks. There are a variety of sub-theories that discuss which mechanisms exclude blacks and what the benefits are that accrue to whites. They generally share as part of their goal changing the values of whites so that whites no longer derive benefits from excluding blacks.
The market theory basically sees racism arising during the prehistory of the modern market and argues that under the operation of a free market racism is irrational. Allowed to operate, the logic of the market will punish racists who ignore labor and sales markets because of race. This punishment will eventually dissolve racial attitudes. The persistence of racism results from a vicious cycle in which poverty creates a culture of poverty, as well as the persistence of the irrational attitudes of whites. Change lies in letting the free market work.

The radical perspective sees racism as necessary for the sustained growth of capitalism. Racism is one of a series of ways in which the work force is divided against itself, thereby allowing owners to realize profits. Furthermore, race can become a basis for organizing against exploitation particularly by appealing to creating state power that alters the capitalist political economy. Solutions then lie in empowering the work force so that they are not divided, shifting the defining criterion so that a basis other than race divides the work force, or dismantling the capitalist political economy.

There are clear, if incomplete parallels to be drawn between the theoretical positions and these policy positions. So, for instance, the cartel theory, with its cartel of whites pitted against blacks is similar to the diffusion model of two very different cultures. Only by changing the attitudes, the mindsets, will integration result. And, the status model and the market model share a similar basis. Groups are positioned in the social hierarchy by the market. Similarly both seem to share an expectation that free operation of the market should dissolve racial categories as it has dissolved other ethnicities. Finally, the race-class model and the radical model share a commitment to studying the interaction of race and class as fundamental features defining American culture.

The point is not that there is a perfect correlation between these historical archeological theories and policy theories, but rather that there should be. Living in a society that attempts to cope with racism means that our theories about the past cannot help but be influenced by our understandings of the present. We should acknowledge this and use our data to evaluate and build robust theories about race. So, for instance, under the penetration of the market, do the material conditions of Afro-Americans more closely approximate those of whites earning similar incomes? Or do differences persist that can best be understood as the persistence of mindsets? Or does rapid capital accumulation in an area result in the growing divergence in African-American and white material conditions, as profits are extracted from a divided labor force? These are all reasonable questions to pose and the data from historical archeology on everyday living would provide a fuller insight into the nature of the color line than is available from studies of documents alone.

Let me be clear about this point. Our theoretical context is demonstrably influenced by our data on the past. I am also arguing that it is unavoidably influenced by the data on and theories about racism in the present. The most reasonable course would be to acknowledge this interpenetration and use our data to help build richer understandings of persistence and change in the color line.

The final context is the meaning Afro-American sites have for the members of the United States political economy. That is, in a racially charged society, it probably makes a difference to the local residents that a site was inhabited by Afro-Americans -- sometimes a positive difference and sometimes a negative difference, but it probably matters. Let me briefly discuss some of the meanings attached to the DuBois site.

The DuBois site today is about 5 acres of woodland and stone field. The house and barn were torn down in the 1950s so from the main road it is impossible to discern that the lot was once inhabited. In the early twentieth century a small parcel was taken out of the middle of the DuBois lot so that the lot now looks like a U. A house was built on this notch; it is presently inhabited by a white working class family.

In the 1960s some landscaping work was done on the DuBois lot in conjunction with a ceremony of which I will speak more. The landscaping work was done by Afro-Americans. With this background, let me describe the attitude of the white householder.

When we first started surveying the site I introduced myself and explained what we were about. His primary reaction was relief that the composition of the crew was all white. He was very unhappy that the previous work crew had been Afro-American, whom he does not trust. The basis for his mistrust was a fight/mugging in which he was involved in Boston. Note, he had no specific problems with the landscaping crew. So he did not care what we did, since we were white. And, he suggested that we use his water faucet.

We assiduously did not use his water faucet nor did we step on his property for the next two summers. I did anticipate with some satisfaction his discomfort if the DuBois site became a tourist attraction for radicals -- Afro-American and white --vacationing in the Berkshires. Though the site carried little meaning for him, those who came to the site would be the focus of his deep seated racism.

However, his was not the only racism that surrounds the site. The DuBois site is a National Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places -- rather distinguished credentials for a and a half
acre of poison ivy choked woodlot. However, for a time, in the recent past, it was the eye of a storm.

In 1969, six years after DuBois's death, the site became a National Landmark. This was the end of a decade of civil rights activism, a year after the assassination of Martin Luther King and a period when inner cities were in rebellion. The dedication ceremony attracted some of the most prominent leaders of the Civil Rights movement and international dignitaries, including Julian Bond, Horace Mann Bond, Ossie Davis, the ambassador of Ghana, and a counselor from the embassy of the People's Republic of China.

The local community of Great Barrington was not particularly happy with the attention given to their son, nor with DuBois himself. Local veterans groups attempted to block the dedication. The town government questioned the legality of using the site as a park. An editorial in the Berkshire Eagle captured the hostile sentiments of the townpeople and suggested that they seek revenge on the site after the dedication.

Here we begin to see the kind of symbolic importance that even a poison ivy patch can take on. And given this, even the most vehemently neutral archaeologist would have to ponder the politics of the local context. Was the site intentionally trashed, and if so how and where? Was the extent of the vandalism such that further excavation would be fruitless? And were present excavations secure?

Let me just address the last issue about contemporary security. The same editorialist who suggested vandalizing the site in 1969 retracted this idea in 1979 in another editorial and recognized DuBois's prominence, by quoting from the same editorialist ten years later. Even with this change in the official community attitude, it should be clear that an archaeologist has to know about the local significance of a site if they are to conduct archeology.

Conclusions

I will conclude with some thoughts on the relation of politics and Afro-American archeology. Work at the DuBois site is impossible to conduct without considering the site's political context. The meaning of the site for local and national citizens affects the legislation protecting it as well as the proclivity to vandalize it. Its resident shaped the political context in which we today struggle with racism. And this societal struggle conditions the theories researchers use to penetrate the lives of past Afro-Americans. Though one might seek to limit the influence of politics to the issue of site integrity, to fully understand and use this site to contribute to historical archeology entails an awareness of the politics of race in the United States.

Research at the site aims to contribute to these ends. We are still analyzing data from a survey of the site and results are preliminary. There are three studies worth mentioning, in summary.

First, the integrity of the site seems quite high. We have identified two large surface middens, numerous trash pits, the house foundation, and well. None show evidence of systematic destruction, either to desecrate the site or to hunt for bottles. I suspect that the vandalism urged by the local paper was not carried out because by 1969 there really was nothing to vandalize, no standing structures. It was just a lot in the woods.

Second, in preliminary analyses of glassware and architecture, we have compared the DuBois site with three other northern rural sites, one an Afro-American site. The comparisons are limited by the lack of strictly comparable data and any conclusions should be based on comparisons to a larger range of sites. With these caveats in mind, the results contradicted aspects of both the diffusion and the status theories. In particular, market participation was similar at a white site and the DuBois site, and different from that at the other Afro-American site. This seems mostly due to the sites' locations relative to the national market as the DuBois site and the white site were rural and at some remove from New York City; the other Afro-American site, though rural, was located very close to New York. Market position can override deep cultural differences postulated by the diffusionist position. However, in a study of consumption patterns we found that the DuBois site differs markedly from both the other sites. Neither market nor race alone account for the differences. Though these are as yet slender threads, it does seem that a theoretical perspective that considers both race and class would best help sort out the material world of the DuBois site.

In a third study we have found DuBois's writings of considerable use. A perplexing problem arose during the first field season. Oral history indicated that after DuBois's uncle sold the site in the 1870s it went into the hands of poor white families. Title research by Richard Gumser and Nancy Milligan identified these white families as headed by William Piper and Edward Monkter. Unfortunately what was coming out of the ground at that time was material from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the period of the poor whites, not the DuBois family. So, it looked as though most of the archeology might relate to rural whites and not to rural Afro-Americans.
Two documents by DuBois dissuaded me of this opinion. At the age of fifteen DuBois became the Great Barrington correspondent for newspapers located in New York and in Springfield, Massachusetts. His reports are basically social notes, describing life in Great Barrington. In his 3/14/1885 communication to the \textit{The Freeman} he notes that: "Last Friday night a surprise party from this place, took a sleigh ride to Sheffield, and visited Mr. William Piper. There were about thirty present, and festivities were continued till an early hour" (Lester 1971:168). So, DuBois is somehow friends with the Piper family. The Wooster family also appears in these social notes.

The second document is a partial genealogy DuBois provides that was extended by F. Pomerantz and R. Dumaer so it now includes approximately 100 individuals. Both Piper and Wooster appear on this genealogy, married to DuBois's cousins. Thus, the site only seems to pass out of DuBois's family's hands because the Great Barrington residents only remembered the connections through the males (a pattern Anne Yentsch has discussed). However, the land quite firmly stayed in the family, through females for over a century.

Though I have family continuity, the racial identity of Piper and Wooster are not yet known. My point is to indicate how DuBois's writings once again provide an invaluable context that raise political questions. If Piper and Wooster were white, it raises the issue of the nature of the color line in Western Massachusetts, an area with a reputation for abolitionist sentiments, refugee populations, and rest and recreation for social activists. Did this liberalism extend to interracial marriages? And, did it make American apartheid somehow different in Western Massachusetts, or are we going to uncover the same subtle and destructive racism that characterizes the North? The context of DuBois makes asking these kinds of questions inevitable.

We are beginning to put our understanding of the political contexts of the DuBois site to use in interpreting its archeology. And even though we have only preliminary senses of its effect on the theories of historical archeology, some points are already evident. It should be clear that consideration of this site concerns the issue of political empowerment. For instance, how did an Afro-American community survive American apartheid in the nineteenth century in a way that nurtured one of the significant shapers of recent American and world culture? And, there is the question of how this National Landmark site might best contribute to the empowerment of the Afro-American community today. Neither of these issues is resolved, but both must be addressed in future work and plans. What is obvious in that politics and the DuBois site are entwined.

Work at DuBois as well as at white sites has raised an additional issue. Why is it that the fruitful and necessary interplay of politics and archeology is so obvious on Afro-American sites and so difficult to acknowledge on white sites or prehistoric sites? Why rather than seeing and thereby controlling the conjunction of the political and archeological contexts, do we so often attempt to ignore these contexts? I see no acceptable rationale for ignoring these intellectual, historical, and practical contexts, especially by students of anthropology. Thus, I see the DuBois site presenting a challenge to white archeologists so often raised by struggles against racism, namely to put white affairs in order. It will only be when we take these political contexts into consideration, and study for instance racism at white as well as Afro-American sites, that we will be doing an historical archeology capable of truly coming to grips with American culture.