

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **W.E.B. Du Bois: Prophet of social justice in the 21st Century**

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Received 12 July, 2021; Accepted 8 September, 2021

**These are times that trouble the soul. American sociologist, pragmatist, and race historian, W.E.B. Du Bois can be helpful in examining and resolving some of the racial and political tensions in the United States. After the lynching of sixty-two African Americans in Atlanta in 1906, Du Bois wrote a year later that the problem of the nineteenth century is the problem of color line. An examination of his' race theory is helpful in the same way as history is instructive. Black history is intertwined and forms with the mosaic of American history. Du Bois as a sociologist cannot be separated from Du Bois as a social activist. His life was one of incessant struggle to challenge the status quo and to expose the contradictory nature of nation's ideals. His intellectual pedigree underscores his political and social activism. Du Bois is relevant today to the secular as well and the religious world in the struggle for social justice. This paper argues that a re-reading of Du Bois should be examined in view of the totality of his own professed religious and spiritual temperament and sensibilities. Du Bois challenges the discipline of sociology to probe into the unexplored dimension of his life and works. This is also a clarion call for young people of all races and ethnicities to interrogate the relevance of his work in addressing social justice. His theory informs his praxis more so today as the nation faces new challenges in post-Obama presidency and the ravaging effects of COVID-19.**

**Key words:** Africanism, double consciousness, Africa, justice inequality, Jim Crow, racism, sociology, prophets, secular.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Whether writing or talking about scientific sociology in the United States, few scholars hardly mention W.E.B. Du Bois even though in the history of the discipline Du Bois was foremost. As the first African American to obtain and earned PhD from Harvard University, his breadth of knowledge and exposure spanned many continents. Morris asserted that "the first school of scientific sociology in the United States was founded by a black

professor located in a historically black university in the South (Morris) Du Bois joined Atlanta University in 1897, the year usually deemed to be the starting point of the University of Chicago being the first and the most influential School of Sociology in the United States. Some American universities have challenged this prevailing and accepted view of the primacy of the University of Chicago (Morris, 2015). American academy

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has by and large denied the place and position of Du Bois in the pantheons of origins of sociology in the United States.

The counterview that Du Bois is America's founding scholar of sociology par excellence is not only unknown and untaught but it failed to give Du Bois the proper recognition he deserves.<sup>1</sup> Du Bois lived through the Jim Crow era in the United States where the "scientific" captivity of race as a product of biology rather than a social construct deeply affected academia. Du Bois vociferously disagreed through his lectures and writings. In essence, racist views are not just the prerogative of the unlettered population but were also deeply held mostly white social scientists who defined blacks as biologically and culturally inferior (Morris, 2015). Du Bois is however slowly receiving the recognition due to him now after over six decades of his death in Ghana, West Africa.

Du Bois was an internationalist, his over nine decades of living culminating in his death and burial in Accra, Ghana is reminiscent of the power of the human spirit to transcend race, gender, and class. Third, Du Bois speaks to people today like the foremost and formidable ancestor with inimitable voice from the great beyond enlightening their enlightenment even in these dark days that try the soul. As one black scholar indicated, Du Bois entire life itself was truthfully a powerful, prophetic and prayerful act." Du Bois' familiarity and profound references to Hebrew literature reverberate in the entire body of his work. It is pertinent to reference one of W.E.B. Du Bois's sociological prayers taken from Prayers for Dark People: (Du Bois, 1980).<sup>2</sup>

Give us this night, O God, Peace in our land and the long silence that comes after strain and upheaval. Let us sense the solemnity of this day – its mighty meaning, its deep duty. Save this government. Cherish its great ideals – give strength and honesty and unbending courage to him whom the people have named Chief Magistrate of these United States and make our country in truth a land where all men and women are free and equal in the pursuit of happiness. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

Events of the last three decades, from the beating of Rodney King to series of documented police brutality against black people have made the above prayers not only prescient and prophetic but also timely. These are times that trouble the soul. From Black Lives Matter to police brutality and the mass incarceration of young black men, the need for the discipline of sociology to learn from history of black struggle, especially from one of the key

figures in that struggle cannot be overstated. W.E.B. Du Bois still matters today almost six decades after his death in Ghana, West Africa. In fact, one of the core concerns of Black Lives Matter was not only the racial profiling and police brutality but also the unrepresented mass incarceration and sentencing disparity of young black men compared to others in the United States. Michelle Alexander ably noted that there are more black Americans incarcerated today than they were enslaved in the middle of the nineteenth century, a serious cause for concern on the nature of the New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2010).

The aforementioned prayer is reminiscent of Declaration of Independence of the United States: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." From every historical experience of black people, this founding document was not intended or applicable to people of color. In fact, to distinguish oneself from back Americans became the price and the hallmarks of citizenship. In fact, for others to demonstrate they are historically and categorically different from blacks, opposite to, and even hostile to blacks became structured in the very fabric of the nation (Matory, 2015). It does not matter if the person making the distinction was native born American part of the hordes coming from the Old World. The stigma on blacks still remains the same even among the new immigrants from other parts of the world. Du Bois prayer to God to make our country in truth a land where all men and women are free and equal in the pursuit of happiness is apt and relevant. There are five areas of focus on Du Bois as a Prophet of Social Justice in the 21st century. I will now begin with the first part, the historical aspect of Du Bois life.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this paper is largely qualitative which by and large seek to describe, explain, and explore the aspects of Du Bois life more so during the last ten years before his death in 1963. The descriptive aspect of qualitative research often involves some form of interpretivist tradition in what Carr (Carr, 2021) describes as "thick description" with substantive reference to Clifford Geertz book, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973). Thick description includes understanding of behavior within social context in a manner that eventually provides knowledge of the behavior to outsiders.

Additionally, the explanatory aspect of qualitative approach to research aims to articulate processes in which social phenomena unfolds. Exploratory aspect of this qualitative approach is like a guidepost that helps them study social issues or problems in a targeted way. In this project, the key statement of the problem is the pervasive and pernicious forms of subjugation, oppression, and dehumanization African Americans have faced right from the moment of entry into the US involuntarily. Du Bois was born three years after the end of the Civil War in the US and right from the moment when it dawned on him that he was black, the veil between him and the American society remained intact until his emigration to

<sup>1</sup>I remember to my utter dismay and shock, sitting at a graduate sociology seminar at the University of Denver where the professor even failed to acknowledge that Du Bois was a sociologist according to the very definition of the word.

<sup>2</sup>My Past, Present and Future: <http://tomekhet.tumblr.com/post/53149836396/du-bois-25th-birthday-message-to-himself>

<sup>3</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois. 1980. Prayers for Dark People. The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst Page 5.

Ghana.

Literature reviews include autobiographical experiences of Du Bois himself as well as some of his writings on existence in black America. His life was replete with the theme of social justice when speaking, writing, or in other forms of engagement with people at home and abroad. The writer also had the privilege of attending a conference moderated by Professor Edward Blum for three weeks at Calvin College, which provided opportunities for extensive dialog on Du Bois.

Blum's magisterial work on Du Bois was a major influence on this paper (Blum, 2007a). Finally, this project is to some extent is methodologically similar to an earlier work done by the author on: *Ethno-religious Power: Yoruba Immigrant Women in the United States*.<sup>4</sup> The method of data collection for this and earlier projects is not dissimilar: it is qualitative with an ethnographic bent in the sense that some forms of unstructured interviews were used to interact with students, professors, and authors who see Du Bois as living legend even after many decades of his death. Sample key discussion and interview questions are listed hereunder:

### Sample interview/discussion/focus group questions

- 1) How were Du Bois childhood experiences at Great Barrington relevant today in race relations in the United States?
- 2) Du Bois lived through the Jim Crow laws in the US and many people have suggested that there is now a New Jim Crow in the US in light of the black prison population and the increasing surge in hate crimes and brutality against blacks. What are the similarities and differences?
- 3) Du Bois was an internationalist by and large. To what extent is this manifested among black scholars today especially as it relates to Africa?
- 4) The theory of the Talented Tenth was widely debated between Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. How do you think this plays out today especially among young African Americans?
- 5) The past few years have witnessed forms of resistance, Black Lives Matter, MeToo Movement, Violence against black in forms of police brutality, and the evisceration of the Voting Rights Acts by the Supreme Court and now by the states' legislature. What does portend to future race relations in the United States?
- 6) We have expressions like post-racial, post-Obama, and post-civil right. However, have things really changed in the US after the election of the first Black President?

## RESULTS

Responses to the methodological questions above vary according to the audience. The following are the breakdown according to students, faculty members interviewed (Blum in person and Raboteau, West, and Gates through video presentations and books). Ten outsiders whose knowledge of Du Bois was sparse and limited also form part of this project.

First, most students were impressed with Du Bois academic pedigree and his resolve to make something out of his life despite growing up in rather difficult times in American history. White students were especially impressed with his scholarship being the first African American to obtain a doctoral degree from Harvard. The

experience of Du Bois being shunned and rejected after giving a Valentine card to a girl in his class in elementary school had a particularly negative response among white female students. They thought despite the racial divide in the country, the gesture given by Du Bois to the girl was thought of as severe, dehumanizing and uncalled for; in essence simply discourteous. A few black students in class could relate to the experience even though they live one hundred and fifty years after Du Bois experience and encounter with the girl. Some suggested that was probably one of the reasons that led to the veil espoused by Du Bois separating him from the white world in the years to come. Notable however is the fact that most students have never heard of Du Bois before the experience, which is a testament to the paucity of historical knowledge not only about the United States in general but the black experience?

Second, the topic of police brutality was one that engendered lively discussion in light of the killings of George Floyd, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and other black youths who were constantly racially profiled. Some students opined that it is understandable why Black Lives Matter has become the new Civil Rights movement and it is simply unconscionable why anyone who deny the facts on the killing and dehumanization of blacks. They see the connection dating back to 1992 brutal beating of Rodney King by the police who were eventually not found guilty despite the furor it brought all over the nation. Students who have taken the course in Urban Sociology were able to connect the concept of the New Jim Crow to the title of the book, the New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2010). The significance of Du Bois in the area of social justice which formed the warp and weft of his life left the students convinced that his relevance in the intellectual world of academia in the United States cannot be ignored or dismissed.

Third, dialog with Professor Blum was especially instructive. It was one thing to read an author and quite another to meet face to face with her/him to expatiate more on the book. Blum is a lover of Du Bois through and through. His prodigious knowledge of Du Bois was firmly demonstrated in the book he wrote in later years on the *Color of Christ* where he made copious references to Du Bois early religious life and faith in God which was not abandoned despite some people claiming that Du Bois was an agnostic later in life (Blum and Harvey, 2012). Blum's discussion on the last rite performed by a minister of the gospel who had to be specially flown to Ghana to officiate struck me as rather salient. The discussion was as if Blum was there at the burial ceremony itself. It was one of the highlights of the encounter and the conference.

### Du Bois as a prophetic voice

Sociologists can be heralded as prophets by the nature of their engagement with societies. Through critical analysis, research and use of different perspectives, they

<sup>4</sup>Olagoke, Abolade, Ezekiel. Chapter 11 in: Bonafacio, Glenda, T. and Angeles, Vivian S.M. 2011. *Gender, Religion, and Migration: Pathways of Integration*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC.: Boulder.

speak to societies with the hope of social change. Whether it is Marx, Weber, Comte, and others, the goal is to have a new science of society towards changing it. The whole essence of social scientific research is to look at a problem, formulate hypothesis, do extensive literature review, collect and analyze data with the hope that whatever conclusion one reaches will be applied to society. Sociology is parts of the agents of social change, changing the future of societies, communities, nations and the world.

Du Bois childhood at Great Barrington MA was marked by church attendance and religious activities and was richly shaped by the Spirituals and other songs of sorrows of his ancestors. According to Blum, Du Bois heard these songs as a student teacher in Nashville in the 1880s where he found meaning within meaning culminating even in the title of his book, "The Soul of Black Folk." (Blum, 2007c). Toward the tail end of his life before emigrating to Ghana joined the Holy Trinity Church in Brooklyn, a multi-racial church which Du Bois felt comfortable at least to be a member. The minister of the church, William Howard Melish gave the last rite in Ghana before Du Bois was buried. It was further noted that he had to obtain a special passport to fly to Ghana for this important ceremony (Blum, 2007c)

The word prophet used in this sense to describe Du Bois is rather in rather incomplete or sanitized. According to Josh Kwan, "In Old Testament times, the archetypal prophets were often loners who railed against the sorry state of the world. They walked closely with God, listened to His truth, and spoke out as a piercing voice in opposition to mainstream culture, often to deaf and obstinate ears." In this day and age, one does not have to wear robes with the long staff like Moses to speak truth to power.

Prophetic voices can be in social organizations, social institutions, cultures, and other organs of human societies. In essence, prophetic voices do not necessarily have to be shaped and patterned according to Moses, Ezekiel, Jeremiah or Daniel. Some of our prophetic voices can be agnostics, atheists, free thinkers, Christians, Muslims or people from other religious or non-religious affiliations. We have had them in the past: abolitionists, women's rights movement, civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, and many others where men and women, young and old desire to change societies or organizations from inside out, not as lonely voice from the outside – like the biblical prophets. In the final analysis the goal is to challenge and address structures of evil, address inequalities, intolerance, and inequities in societies. Du Bois work and life demonstrated qualities and characteristics of a prophet.

## DISCUSSION

The key components of the discussion section are amalgamation of interactions among two contemporarily

relevant scholars on Du Bois (Blum and Raboteau), classroom discussions, and focus groups on some germane aspects of Du Bois writings. The aforementioned questions were tabled for discussions in light of the current spate of killings and hate crimes against African Americans. Also inclusive are video lectures by Professors Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates who were colleagues at Harvard University. Both scholars are avowedly Du Boisians in intellectual and pedagogical orientations. Their texts and video presentations have been used in sociological theories class at Waynesburg University. Professor West has also given lectures on many campuses in the United States including my alma mater at Wheaton College. Some students from Waynesburg University have had opportunities to hear him speak at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, PA. All these interactions have formative influences on the subsequent discourses below, results and conclusion.

Du Bois oral, social, and academic history is littered with religious themes. Not only is this demonstrated in many autobiographies, but also in his many publications. According to Edward Blum, "Religious ideas shaped Du Bois autobiographical works, and stood as constitutive elements of his shifting sense and presentation of self" (Blum, 2007b). Du Bois religious childhood in Great Barrington in Massachusetts inculcated in him Christian morals and values which formed and informed his belief in communities that transcended racial boundaries. He saw his life as a holy calling where higher powers prepared him to be the mouthpiece of his community to the world at large. African American experience of slavery, sorry songs, and the absurdity of life in the United States for black men and women enabled him to tap into transcended forces to address the situation in life of his people.

It is in this regard that they are able to see the complexity of the life of Du Bois, the many sides of his soul, so to speak. Blum (2007a) further elaborated that Du Bois many autobiographies "served as mythologies of the self where he drew on a variety of religious allusions and symbolic structures to present his self as a hero-priest and a prophet teacher." Like the prophets of Israel, he spoke truth to power. On his twenty-fifth birthday celebration, Du Bois' religious laden message was poignant then and it is reminiscent of the conditions of those living as pariahs in societies. He recapitulated and appropriated Queen Esther's words: "I will go unto the king, which is not according to the law and if I perish – I perish."

Du Bois also saw his life with markers in epochal events in world history: For example, a prophetic figure, Du Bois saw cosmic elements in his autobiographical narratives and social history. In highly racialized America of his time, Du Bois was a prophetic intellectual with a black face. His life, struggles, challenges were interwoven and shaped by racial discrimination and racial consciousness under Jim Crow. This in essence, was following the long traditions of African Americans from the

time when the first Africans were involuntarily brought to the Americas: Du Bois history and racial formation were therefore in line with the traditions and conversations with the likes of Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Malcolm X. According to Blum, and for Du Bois, “religion animated their perspectives on self and society, their conception of being and living.”<sup>5</sup>

### Du Bois as a sociologist and social activist

Du Bois has been described in many appellations: sociologist, historian, secular prophet, social activist among many. Throughout his life and career which spanned over nine decades, after his doctoral degree from Harvard University and University of Berlin, he taught Latin and Greek at Wilberforce University, did a social history of the Negro in Philadelphia, taught sociology and history at Atlanta University, editor of the *Crisis* after Atlanta academic career, and was engaged in many social and political activities in the United States and around the world. He even ran for Senate in 1950, with all these appellations, some have found it difficult to pin Du Bois down to a pin down or compartmentalize Du Bois under a single academic or professional rubric. The author remembers during my graduate program when a professor said he did not consider Du Bois a sociologist. He was just getting immersed in the writings of Du Bois at the time and this deeply infuriated him that he began to have some doubts about whether the professor was being charitable to the entire gamut of Du Bois life and works. On one hand, Smith (2014) description of the discipline of sociology is applicable to Du Bois when he asserted:

*Sociology as an academic discipline appears on the surface to be a secular scientific enterprise. Its founding fathers were mostly atheists. Its basic operating premises are secular and naturalistic. And its disciplinary culture is indifferent and sometimes hostile to religion, often for what are thought of as rationalistic and scientific reasons. Sociologists today are disproportionately not religious, compared to all Americans, and often irreligious people.*<sup>6</sup>

Even though Du Bois' childhood at Great Barrington in Massachusetts was marked by church attendance, Sunday school and other religious activities, by the time he got to Fisk and Harvard University, and eventually the

University of Berlin, his faith in dogmatic and unthinking Christianity had waned. Some even described him as agnostic not only because of this exposure to Ivy League institutions and interaction with men of letters of the day, but more so with the encounter at Wilberforce University when he was asked to lead in prayers in a student gathering. Du Bois, apart from taking classes and being influenced by the likes of William James at Harvard University he was also a contemporary of Max Weber.

For a long time, ordinary people's experiences and day to day interactions especially in religious milieu while not taken seriously on their own terms but to be better analyzed and understood through sociological interpretations of their scientific causes and meanings in terms of conceptual analysis like class struggle, inequality, social control, anomie, alienation, etc, all these need to be reevaluated and re-examined. In fact, Smith project and purpose is to see sociology itself as a sacred project at heart. He would further assert in this regard:

*Sociology today is animated by sacred impulses, driven by sacred commitments and serves a sacred project. We might even say that American sociology's project is spiritual as long as we understand the full breadth and depth of what "spiritual" in this case means. American sociology in short, does not escape the analytic net that it casts over the rest of the ordinary world. Sociology itself is part of the very human, very social, and often social and spiritual world.*<sup>7</sup>

Du Bois would agree no less with Smith with the exception of a more critical race theory in light of experiences of people of color after over one hundred years when he wrote, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of color line.” While things have remarkably changed today especially in the social, political and economic lives of African Americans, vestiges of racism still remain even in post-Obama racial realities. It is in this regard that Du Bois still speaks to us, not as an arm-chair sociologist, but as a social activist who is not afraid of whose ox is gored in addressing the structures of evil and structures of oppression local, nationally, and globally. Perhaps it is apt to remember that sociologists too are influenced not only by their social background but can also be part of the problem if they fail to take this into consideration and operate under the rubrics of positivist value neutrality. Despite his many foibles especially in his membership of the Communist Party in 1961, Du Bois was not remiss in addressing social structures and the ways they have subjected African Americans to inferior and perpetual juniority in human affairs especially in the United States. His sociological orthodoxy was underscored by praxis not only among his academic peers but also among the downtrodden and the disinherited of the earth.

<sup>5</sup>Discussion with Professor Edward Blum at Christian Scholars Conference on the Color of Christ, Calvin College Grand Rapids, Michigan, Summer 2016. This conference provided an avenue to discuss key aspects of Du Bois life with someone whose work on Du Bois has shed more light on his prophetic voices and the relevance of these voices today in Black America.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Smith (2014). *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page IX. See also Elaine Howard Ecklund and Christopher Scheitle, 2007, “Religion among Academic Scientists: Distinctions, Disciplines, and Demographics,” *Social Problems*, 54(2): 289-307.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* page X.

One of the greatest tributes paid to Du Bois life and works is demonstrated in the work of Shawn Alexander (Alexander, 2015) when he wrote:

*Despite his ineradicable presence in American and international history, and numerous academic pages written about his activism and intellectual brilliance, the vast majority of Americans still have little knowledge of the man, his thought, or his actions.*<sup>8</sup>

To underscore's Alexander's assertion, perhaps it is this poverty of knowledge about Du Bois that brought up the possibility of exhuming his body from where he was buried in Ghana in a conversation between students of color at Harvard University in the early nineties, something which was thought to be almost sacrilegious by African students at Harvard that the old sage would be disturbed in his grave just to satisfy the seemingly lack of curiosity to learn about one of the greatest minds in the United States. Regarding the breadth of Du Bois scholarship and activism, Alexander went further by asserting:

*He was an extraordinary author who published twenty books of poetry literature, and social, historical, economic, and political inquiry, the majority of which appeared in the final third of his life. In addition, he gave countless addresses, wrote hundreds of newspaper columns, edited a number of academic and popular journals, and helped form and actively participated in many civil rights organizations.*<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Very few people have read or heard about W.E.B. Du Bois today, even at college campuses. He lived through Jim Crow and died on the eve of Dr. King's "I have a Dream" speech in Washington in 1963. The sixties were marked an era of televised media where many people at home and abroad witnessed brutalities against blacks in broad daylight. Things have remarkably improved over the last thirty years with the Internet, Facebook, Instagram and other forms of social media. George Floyd's killing in Minnesota would not have the effect on the populace even to the point of convicting a police officer for murder had it not been a teenager's smartphone who recorded the more than nine minutes of the officer's kneed on his neck. In fact, it was seeing these atrocities online that prodded many whites locally and globally to ask, what can be done to address the ideal of reconciling the country's founding principle with practice. As Albert Raboteau observed, "This kind of

empathetic understanding is crucial to releasing the efficacy of the redemptive suffering that King and others preached" (Raboteau, 2016). Events are not only witnessed simultaneously in the US but also all over the world.

Du Bois underscored the American dilemma in 1901 by asserting that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." Apart from roles which race and racism had played in the past in perpetual subjugation of blacks and other minorities, COVID-19 further exacerbated the problem with minorities, aged, and those in the frontline bearing the brunt of those affected by the pandemic. The situation does not stop here: sweeping attacks on refugees, immigrants, foreigners, women, members of the LGBTQ communities, Jews, and many others have had their humanities assaulted as in no other time in American history. The engendering of injustice, intolerance and inequalities all point to the precariousness of humanity which does not augur well for the future (Pannell, 2021). Du Bois's color line was a line that brought further distances between peoples, races, ethnicities, cultures, religion and classes.

The choice is between going forward, getting things right so the nation is not further plunged into disaster and maintaining the status quo of denials, and instigation of fears, partisanship that failed to reckon with reason, science, and facts. It is a choice between the fulfilling the ideals of democracy or springing toward fascism and authoritarianism.

History can be the guide only if the leaders and the people being led can learn from it. Du Bois' prayer written in 1910 can be instructive as the nation finds itself in this predicament. Du Bois still speaks today as this final prayer attests:

*Give us in our day O God to see the fulfillment of thy vision of peace may these young people grow to despise false ideals of conquest and empire all the tinsel of war. May we strive to replace force with justice?*

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interests.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was supported by the author's participation as Senior Fellow in the "Orthodoxy and Human Rights" project, sponsored by Fordham University's Orthodox Christian Studies Center, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and Leadership 100.

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<sup>8</sup> Shawn Leigh Alexander. 2015. *W.E.B. Du Bois: An American Intellectual and Activist*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, page vii.

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