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## Review of Francine Rusan Wilson, *The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies, 1890-1950*

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### **Abstract**

In this beautifully written book Francille Rusan Wilson examines the lives and professional careers of fifteen African American labor historians and social scientists. Relying on extensive archival research and oral history interviews, she looks at these individuals considering gender (something rarely done), class, and the time period in which they worked. These social scientists all entered their fields between 1890 and 1935 and, according to Wilson, were motivated by a desire to improve the situation for African American workers throughout the United States.

### **Comments**

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In this beautifully written book Francille Rusan Wilson examines the lives and professional careers of fifteen African American labor historians and social scientists. Relying on extensive archival research and oral history

interviews, she looks at these individuals considering gender (something rarely done), class, and the time period in which they worked. These social scientists all entered their fields between 1890 and 1935 and, according to Wilson, were motivated by a desire to improve the situation for African American workers throughout the United States. Interestingly, these scholars were also social activists, publishing not only in academic journals but also in more mainstream black publications such as *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. In addition, many of these individuals founded organizations and led desegregation efforts both locally and nationally. They were the black public intellectuals of their day—though some of them were more vocal than others. Wilson refers to the fifteen men and women as “segregated scholars” in order to “signify the ironic and dynamic tension between their insistence that as social scientists their absolute objectivity was not only possible but was an essential ingredient in planning any social reforms, and their subjectivity as members of an oppressed racial group who shared all of the public indignities of Jim Crow America with the working-class men and women they studied” (p. 2). Often, Wilson celebrates the achievements and innovation of those profiled in her book; however, she is also quite willing to offer critique. For example, she applauds W. E. B. Du Bois, the subject of chapter 1, for scolding whites’ tendency to judge “all blacks on the basis of black criminals and thieves” but rebukes him for his own “simplistic stereotypes,” such as his characterization in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) of black workers as “careless, unreliable, and unsteady” (p. 16).

Of significance for readers is Wilson’s depiction of how labor history, black intellectual history, and black women’s history developed in three separate veins and rarely met. Wilson masterfully weaves these three areas together. She offers interesting portraits of the fifteen individuals, occasionally skimming over areas that beg for deeper inquiry and from time to time pushing her interpretation a bit further than her sources allow. That said, examining this many scholars does not permit the kind of in-depth exploration that a single biography does. Here, Wilson provides the reader with a collective intellectual biography that beautifully interlocks three generations of African American social scientists. She follows these individuals “from their graduate training through their public careers,” demonstrating how their own “racial consciousness” led them to chip away at the ideology of Jim Crow through their scholarly endeavors (p. 2).

Chapter 2 focuses on the early social scientists, 1898–1912, including Richard R. Wright Jr. and George Edmund Haynes. According to Wilson, these two men extended Du Bois’s work with their own research on black labor in large northern cities prior to the Great Migration.

Chapter 3 considers the often neglected work of black female social scientists. Here Wilson is creative in her definition of social scientist, noting that many women who contributed to the field were, due to gender bias, unable to attain official status as scholars. She includes, for example, female students, clubwomen, and activists. Wilson argues that activist Ida B. Wells, who showed a statistical correlation between lynching and white insecurities about black economic success, was one of the first African Americans who used social science research methods to promote racial uplift (even before

Du Bois). Wilson's book is particularly important as black women are often omitted from more general historical studies or treated as add-ons. Wilson also discusses the lives of black female students at black colleges, scrutinizing the ways that some administrators and faculty failed to support graduate education for black female students. She also points to the superior support network that black male students enjoyed. Unlike the women, these men found a pipeline to jobs in black colleges and social service organizations.

In chapter 4 Wilson explores the Great Migration (1910–1930), the most vibrant period of intellectual activity for African American scholars. She shows how social scientists from this time not only brought the migration and all its complexities to the attention of the American public but also were instrumental in creating organizations that assisted African Americans in its midst. Individuals covered in this chapter are Carter G. Woodson, Charles S. Johnson, and Charles H. Wesley, among others.

In chapter 5 Wilson recovers the labor studies of five black female social scientists who worked during the Great Migration: Gertrude E. J. McDougald, Helen Brooks Irvin, Emma L. Shields Penn, Elizabeth Ross Haynes, and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander. Of importance are the ways in which “race and gender determined black women’s educational opportunities and occupational choices” (p. 4). The last chapter examines black labor scholars during the New Deal and World War II (1930–1950). Wilson discusses the interconnectedness of the social scientists in her book, showing how many of these men and women built alliances despite political differences.

Overall, this is a well-written, much-needed history that brings together important social scientists with the institutions that they founded and the causes that they championed.

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