

Obituary

CORA DU BOIS (1903–1991)

Cora Du Bois died on April 7, 1991, at the age of eighty-seven, in a nursing home in Brookline, Massachusetts. She had been in failing health for some years. In characteristic fashion, she had her life well in order and was impatiently awaiting death.

Du Bois' friends, colleagues, and former students will remember her as a keen intellect, given to penetrating analysis of ideas and writings, as well as a teacher and scholar ultimately concerned with broad questions of "the panhuman condition and its specific variations" (Du Bois 1980:9). She had little patience with intellectual or institutional smallness of mind and was an intrepid critic of such tendencies. In addition, she had a reputation for fairness and impartiality. From an early age, Du Bois considered herself something of a distant observer of human affairs, who recognized in Sir Roger de Coverley's words—"to live in the world . . . rather as a Spectator of mankind than as one of the species"—expression of a kindred spirit. This tendency to observe from a distance, combined with a persistent desire to understand the human condition, led to a long and fruitful intellectual journey.

Cora Du Bois' career—which included becoming the first woman president of the Association for Asian Studies—spanned much of the twentieth century. She was first a student of history at Barnard College (BA 1927) and Columbia University (MA 1928), where she took a course from Boas and Benedict which stimulated her to pursue a career in anthropology in order "to discipline" a broad historical base with specific facts about specific cultures in specific time periods. She travelled west for graduate work at the recently established Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. There she studied with Lowie and Kroeber, discovered the wide open spaces of the West ("I had never looked *out* before"), and practiced ethnography among Native American tribes of northern California and coastal Oregon.

Completing her Ph.D. in anthropology in 1932 but feeling somewhat dissatisfied with "the blind alleys encountered in investigating social process if psychological orientations and techniques were not employed" (1944: viii), Du Bois next embarked upon a study of psychology and psychiatry in an effort to better explain differences between peoples of different cultures. This path led her even further west, to the remote island of Alor in Indonesia, where she undertook two years (1937–39) of fieldwork in an isolated mountain village, resulting in the landmark study, *The People of Alor* (1944). This book, one of the first efforts at psychocultural synthesis, was theoretically and methodologically innovative.

World War II interrupted Du Bois' academic career and redirected her anthropological and Asian expertise to national and international concerns. She was appointed Chief of the Indonesia Section of the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services during the war, after which she remained with the State Department until 1949, serving as Chief of the Southeast Asian Branch of the Division of Research for the Far East. Subsequently, she was a consultant for the World Health Organization (1950–51) and Director of Research for the Institute

of International Education (1951–54). These experiences with international affairs shifted Du Bois' attention away from psychocultural research in isolated societies toward broad questions of social, political, and cultural change in modern nation-states. It was during this period that she published *Social Forces in Southeast Asia* (1949).

Du Bois returned to academe in 1954 as Zemurray Professor of Anthropology at Harvard University, where she remained—as the only tenured woman in the department—until her retirement in 1969. The culmination of her research career was the “Harvard-Bhubaneswar Project,” an ambitious study of sociocultural change in India, the most complex society she had yet encountered. From 1961–72, Du Bois directed a long-term, multidisciplinary study of a community in India undergoing change from a small, medieval temple town to a modern city of administration.

The Harvard-Bhubaneswar Project exemplified many of Cora Du Bois' personal and intellectual qualities. Conceptually, the project reflected her interest in broad patterns of historical and sociocultural change as well as her recognition that discrete, well-executed studies are required to gain insight into such complex processes. (She always remained suspicious of facile sociocultural generalizations.) Thus, she devised a collaborative and interdisciplinary program in which she supervised the research of fourteen Indian and American graduate students in an exacting manner, while also serving as a personally and intellectually supportive mentor. She was a superb teacher and adviser, her inclination being to challenge and nurture, never to impose or constrain.

Cora Du Bois will be remembered as one of the pioneers in American anthropology and Asian studies. Space does not permit reciting the numerous honors Du Bois received during her lifetime, but it is fitting to note that her two principal professional organizations awarded her their top honor: She was elected President of the American Anthropological Association (1968–69) and of the Association for Asian Studies (1969–70).

SUSAN SEYMOUR
Pitzer College

References Cited

- DU BOIS, CORA. 1944. *The People of Alor*, with analysis by A. Kardiner and Emil Oberholzer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 1980. “Some Anthropological Hindsight.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 9:1–15.

Erratum

The affiliation of Professor George Rosen, the author of the obituary of Sukhamoy Chakravarty (*JAS* 50.2:482), is the *University of Illinois at Chicago*.