Comment on “Stratification Economics – The Intellectual Tradition”

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1. Introduction

In recent years, several studies have investigated the historical origins of stratification economics and the links between identity-group stratification and economics (Chelwa, Hamilton, and Stewart 2022; Darity 2022; Stewart 2023; Numa and Zahran 2026). Francis and Myers’s essay provides a synthesis of this growing body of scholarship. Two major takeaways stand out. First, their survey gives a first-hand account of the subfield’s development from Samuel Myers Jr., one of its early modern contributors and the first Black American to receive a PhD in economics from MIT in 1976, together with Glenn Loury (Williams 2001, 553). Second, the essay offers an overview of the extraordinary range of influences that underpin the subfield, situating it within broader shifts in economic thought and social theory.

Yet this very breadth and depth come with certain limitations, which we elaborate on below. The contributions of certain key actors appear to be underemphasized. The most revealing example is the treatment of the Black intellectual tradition, which encompasses a wide array of authors and theoretical approaches. Presented late in the text (in the penultimate section), this discussion may give the impression of being ancillary to the main analysis, yet we regard it as the focal point. If the purpose is to revisit the intellectual traditions that “inspire and inform” the development of stratification economics, chronology matters. From this perspective, the storyline would be enhanced by beginning with what is, in fact, the subfield's true point of origin. After all, stratification economics originates in efforts to highlight and analyze the causes, consequences of, and remedies to disparities experienced by Black Americans. This tradition therefore constitutes the natural foundation of what later became known as stratification economics and deserves to be foregrounded as such.

In this regard, the role of W. E. B. Du Bois is especially significant. Acknowledging Du Bois's pioneering contributions is not merely a truth-seeking endeavor; it reaffirms the subfield's core principles and values – human decency and economic and social justice – the very ideals Du Bois championed throughout his extensive body of work. Further, the emphasis on this acknowledgement demonstrates the classical contributions that Black scholars have been making for centuries.

In the remainder of the text, we add depth and context to Francis and Myers's essay by first underlining the pioneering role of two trailblazers: we identify Du Bois as the progenitor of stratification economics. Moreover, we also bring into the discourse the contributions of James B. Stewart, whom we recognize as the earliest substantial modern contributor to the subfield. We then complement this analysis with a discussion of the relationship between the MIT PhD cohort of Black economists and stratification economics along with the relationship between stratification economics and marginalist economic theory (frequently labeled by the hackneyed terms "mainstream" or "neoclassical economics"). We close with the point that scholarship is not devoid of power, politics, and political economy writ large, to which stratification economics itself is not immune.

2. W. E. B. Du Bois, the Progenitor of Stratification Economics

Numa and Zahran (2026)'s *Journal of Economic Literature* article convincingly elevates Du Bois as the *progenitor* of stratification economics. The study reveals many relevant insights and parallels between Du Bois's work and intellectual trajectory and the experience and work of contemporary stratification scholars – albeit not as accomplished as Du Bois. Our archival research into Du Bois's economic training by scholars affiliated with the German Historical School of Economics is particularly illuminating. Although not widely recognized as an economist, Numa and Zahran carefully demonstrate that Du Bois possessed credentials that would have qualified him as an accomplished economist for his time.[1] In fact, the irony is that this lack of acknowledgement is experienced by many Black scholars working in the subfield of stratification economics.

Like stratification economics today, the German Historical School critiqued the discipline for its anemic treatment of power asymmetries and institutions in explaining distribution and economic outcomes. Stratification economics extends these critiques by highlighting the profession's limited acceptance of the role of power and identity, beyond tastes and preferences for bigotry, in determining distribution and outcomes. Numa and Zahran's work therefore traces a compelling intellectual trail from stratification economics back to its progenitor, Du Bois, and further to the German Historical School of Economics that influenced him.

[1] Limited resources and institutional power denied him this recognition. But for the unfortunate loss of scholarship funding and a capricious bureaucratic ruling that barred his graduation on the basis of time in residence, Du Bois would rightfully be recognized as the first Black economist.

Du Bois's underacknowledged but nonetheless groundbreaking analyses predated *all* the traditions and authors described as having informed and influenced stratification economics, including Nobel Prize laureates Gunnar Myrdal and W. Arthur Lewis. Myrdal's case makes especially clear the consequences of departing from a chronological account. A limitation in Francis and Myers's exposition is that Myrdal precedes Du Bois and receives more extensive discussions, which may lead readers to presume that the Swedish economist either predated Du Bois or played a greater role in the development of stratification economics, an ironic implication. As Brundage and Numa (2025) elaborate, Myrdal relied heavily on Du Bois's work. Recall that Du Bois is cited 83 times in *An American Dilemma* (Morris 2015, 216), especially in relation to the Philadelphia Study (Du Bois 1899) and *Black Reconstruction* (Du Bois 1935), two of his most influential opuses.

Du Bois's contributions have long been neglected or understated in the American economics profession. It ultimately fell to Myrdal – a White European scholar of international stature – to validate many of Du Bois's ideas for the American academic establishment. Nonetheless, despite Myrdal's repeated engagement with his work, Du Bois received scant recognition. This underacknowledgment and nuance of race, where the work of a White scholar overshadows or is needed to legitimize that of the Black scholar, may continue to plague Black economists engaged in scholarship concerning racial disparities.

This is not unique to Myrdal. Indeed, Du Bois predated and influenced prominent Black scholars in stratification economics as well. For example, as Numa and Zahran (2026) have shown, substantial continuities link Du Bois to W. Arthur Lewis and Marcus Alexis, two Black economists mentioned in Francis and Myers's essay.

Likewise, previous research has shown that stratification economics traces part of its intellectual lineage to critical race theory. Notably, critical race theorists themselves have drawn heavily on Du Bois (Shuford 2001; Rabaka 2006; Rashid 2011; Hughey 2024). Thus, Harris (1993, 1741–42) builds her pivotal argument about whiteness as racialized privilege squarely on Du Bois's notion of "public and psychological wage," which logically implies – and confirms – that stratification economics also derives from his work. Compelling evidence suggests that Du Bois was the very first stratification economist (Numa 2025).

It is worth noting that the significance of Du Bois's economics and its legacy reach far beyond Black political economy or even stratification economics. His contributions are invaluable to the entire economics profession in two distinct ways. On the positive side, he made seminal contributions to empirical economic analysis (see, for instance, the Philadelphia Study) at a time when the field lacked systematic and comprehensive statistical analyses, which are now a hallmark of the modern economic toolkit. This facet of his visionary and innovative work merits both celebration and renewed engagement. On the troubling side, despite these pioneering contributions, he was ostracized by a predominantly White American academic establishment. The profession stands to gain considerably from undertaking his long-overdue rehabilitation.

Du Bois's work had an astute understanding of the links between race, power, institutions, income and wealth distribution, which is relevant to the hallmark awareness of the iterative and inseparable role of race and identity in determining economic outcomes in stratification economics. Contrary to taste-based and statistical discrimination theories, and in line with stratification economists, he treated race as an endogenous variable. His analysis suggests that racial identity is socially negotiated through interactions between dominant and marginalized groups, in sharp contrast to identity economics à la Akerlof and Kranton, which treats race and ethnicity as at least initially fixed.

Du Bois provided the earliest scientific study of racial prejudice and systematically documented its persistence and the mechanisms that sustain it, differing markedly from Becker's approach. For example, he highlighted collusion among members of the dominant racial group based on intraracial solidarity. Anticipating key insights later formalized by modern stratification economists, Du Bois's analysis demonstrates that, more often than not, race supersedes class (Numa 2025). He treated racialized power dynamics between dominant and marginalized groups as the engine of social change, thereby establishing a foundational framework for studying intergroup inequality (Brundage and Numa 2025).

In Du Bois's framework, the economic system endogenously produces unequal outcomes not fully explained by individual productivity. His economics underscores the narrowness and limitations of profit and utility maximization and efficiency in understanding and explaining group-based differences. In the real world, market competition is rarely truly "free" or "perfect" for members of marginalized groups, who face persistent disadvantages tied to markers of identity, both irrespective of and dependent upon macroeconomic conditions or business cycles. Also, analogous to stratification economics, Du Bois offered a clear rejection of biological and cultural determinism. According to his environmental thesis, poor socioeconomic conditions generate "bad" culture, rather than the reverse.

All in all, Du Bois's economics invites us to return to the very essence of economic inquiry: What is the purpose of an economy (Chelwa, Drummer, and Hamilton 2023)? His answer is collective well-being and the common good. In this framework, economic justice *is* the objective, and there is no inherent trade-off between equity and efficiency.

Returning to Du Bois is more than an exercise in intellectual archaeology. Revisiting his pioneering role and legacy is not simply an act of recognition or rehabilitation. It enables us to amplify the humanistic values of stratification economics through the work of one of the greatest American intellectuals, who devoted both his scholarship and his life to the advancement of Black communities and other marginalized groups in the United States and around the world. Across his published and unpublished writings, Du Bois addressed the legacy of slavery and the deliberate weaponization of social hierarchies by dominant groups. He analyzed the workings of power through a multilayered approach that was both historically grounded and empirically informed. There is not enough space here to thoroughly review all of Du Bois's insights. Nevertheless, we maintain that Du Bois's contributions cannot be overstated (see Numa and Zahran 2026 for a more complete understanding of and appreciation for Du Bois's contributions to economic science).

Beyond the under-recognition of Du Bois, there is another scholar whose contributions are seminal to stratification economics.

3. James B. Stewart and Stratification Economics in the Modern Era

In Francis and Myers's essay, the early origins of modern stratification economics are attributed to Darity's (1982) critique of the human-capital approach to racial inequality. This claim requires correction. The intellectual roots of modern stratification economics can, in fact, be traced further back. We contend that these intellectual foundations begin at least as early as James B. Stewart's (1977) article, "Historical Patterns of Black–White Political-Economic Inequality in the United States and South Africa," published in the *Review of Black Political Economy* (RBPE). Stewart's article draws directly from his doctoral dissertation, completed at the University of Notre Dame the previous year (Stewart 1976).

Francis and Myers rightly note that discussing the shortcomings in the neoclassical approach to intergroup disparities is an integral part of stratification economics. Stewart's dissertation does just that, including a critique of taste-based and statistical discrimination models. More important, in prescient terms Stewart (1976, 4) stresses that "[t]he assumption that racial-cultural group identity and political bargaining power are generated concurrently with the production of material goods and services would appear to allow the development of new insights concerning the phenomenon of economic discrimination."

Stewart's RBPE article examines mechanisms and patterns of White domination of Blacks in the United States and South Africa in the political and economic spheres. Pointing to historical and contemporary parallels between the Black experience in the two countries, Stewart (1977, 266) observes from the outset that his analysis "can serve as a starting point for the development of new theoretical insights regarding the implications of competing racial collectives for political-economic decision making and provide additional data to guide the development of policy recommendations to enhance the welfare of Blacks in both environments." His cross-national study thus paved the way for modern stratification economic thought.

It is important to note that Stewart's work contradicts Becker's results with regard to discrimination in South Africa, drawing very different conclusions with respect to the role of competition in a capitalist economy. Becker (1957, 1971, 1992) applied his model to the apartheid system and claimed that although certain White groups benefited, the White population overall incurred substantial costs. He argued that racial discrimination imposed harm on both majority and minority populations, highlighting the structural inefficiencies of the system and suggesting the eventual demise of the apartheid regime. Reminiscent of Du Bois (1899, [1940] 2007), Stewart's insights instead suggest that racial discrimination on the part of the dominant group unequivocally benefits its members: it is rational and strategic. Moreover, against Becker's revisionist claims, and in the spirit of Du Bois (1935), Stewart reminds us that it is Black agency and resistance that led to the downfall of the institution of slavery, just as Black South Africans successfully fought against apartheid.

Stewart's doctoral work and the article derived from it thus contain several of the canonical pillars of modern stratification economics: racial and income stratification, racialized power dynamics between a dominant and a marginalized group, income and wealth inequality, among other themes.

Next, we turn to the role of the MIT economics department in the development of stratification economics. This topic warrants further consideration given the department's influential standing in economic research.

4. MIT Economics and Stratification Economics

MIT economics is generally considered an epicenter of the neoclassical synthesis, spearheaded by Paul Samuelson, Franco Modigliani, and Robert Solow in the 1950s, and of new Keynesian macroeconomics in the late 1970s. Both paradigms remain dominant in teaching, research, and policy, despite challenges posed by the Great Recession (Galí 2018). In other words, MIT economics appears to have excelled at bridging less marginalist and more marginalist approaches even as it remained firmly anchored in economic orthodoxy. This leads to the authors' claim that Darity, an MIT graduate and one of the architects of stratification economics, never explicitly abandoned all of the core assumptions of neoclassical economics. For us, the relationship is more nuanced.

It is worth noting that a critical mass of Black young scholars entered MIT through an affirmative action initiative designed to desegregate its doctoral economics program in the early 1970s. They brought new perspectives informed by their experiences as members of a marginalized group. Drawing on the Black intellectual tradition and deeply engaged with questions of race and intergroup inequality, many sought to approach economics differently, yet received the formal training of neoclassical and new Keynesian economics. In essence, most were willing to push further in challenging the canonical orthodoxy. In Du Boisian fashion, they, like Darity, saw no sharp boundary between activism and scholarship (Darity and Kreeger 2014, 333).

A major obstacle was that research on racial discrimination fell outside what was then perceived as legitimate economic inquiry. For instance, in correspondence from February 1978, Solow wrote of Myers: "Sam feels the normal conflict between the desire to do good academic economics and the desire to be useful to the black community. I think he will succeed in both" (cited in Darity and Kreeger 2014, 327). In November 1979, he made a similar remark about Darity (ibid.). These comments suggest that, for Solow, race-oriented research by Black PhD students sat uneasily within the disciplinary norms of what counted as "good" economics. Notably, the same topics appeared to elicit greater receptiveness when pursued by White faculty than by Black doctoral students, as illustrated by the work of Thurow (1969, 1975), who was an MIT economics faculty member at the time.

Unfortunately, this affirmative action initiative came to be regarded by some faculty members as a "failed experiment." By 1975, 15 Black graduate students were enrolled, yet none had graduated. By 1980, the admission of Black students declined significantly (Williams 2001, 553).[2] Several factors contributed to this outcome, including inadequate mentoring and a perceived mismatch between students' research interests and the expectations of faculty who were, for the most part, indifferent or even hostile to "Black" or social issues. As a result, the department was subsequently unable to attract or admit sufficient or substantial numbers of Black American graduate students.

Nonetheless, characterizing the program as a failed experiment is not only excessive, but inaccurate. The "experiment" produced the first two Black American graduates of the program (Myers and Loury in 1976), the first Black woman graduate (Linda Datcher in 1978), and several scholars who would become leading figures in modern stratification economics (Myers, Darity, and Rhonda Williams). One can only imagine what the field would look like without such a voluntarist and targeted initiative: the representation of Black American scholars trained in top doctoral programs would likely have been even more limited. By and large, the experiment was successful.

MIT also produced Black economists who represent the antithesis of stratification economics, most prominently Glenn Loury, a conservative and high-profile economist. It would be interesting to address the coexistence of these two trajectories among Black economists and explore two crucial questions: Why did Loury seemingly gain visibility relatively early in his career, while those contributing to stratification economics achieved recognition much later or received

[2] After 1980, the admission of Black applicants became scattered and sporadic. By the early 1990s, Black graduate enrollment was so sparse that Caroline Hoxby's 1994 graduation was mistakenly believed to be the program's first Black PhD (Darity and Kreeger 2014, 321).

considerably less attention? And why was Loury able to secure positions at Ivy League institutions (Harvard, Brown), while stratification scholars did not? The answers to these questions reveal much about an economics profession that, first, pressures young scholars to avoid race-related topics or subjects of central importance to their racial group (Bayer, Hoover, and Washington 2020) and, second, even when such topics are pursued, frames them primarily in ways that prioritize perspectives sympathetic to cultural determinism – the antithesis of stratification economics. A key difference between Loury and a stratification economics lens rests with interpretation of residuals. Stratification economics generally interprets residuals across race as a structural product of power asymmetries established by rule, custom, resource or other power differentials, rather than that of a cultural effect, dynamic or otherwise, grounded in identity. If society and the political economy of scholarship are more rewarding than the latter, this is likely to help explain the divergent career trajectories of Loury and other Black MIT graduates, some of whom became leading contributors to stratification economics.

Our final section revisits a critical question that, although not explicitly posed, is alluded to by Francis and Myers: is stratification economics a genuinely radical alternative that stands in clear discontinuity with neoclassical economics, or merely a marginal modification of the neoclassical framework that ultimately preserves its core theoretical and methodological precepts? If it is the latter, stratification economics would not be much different than, say, new Keynesian economics or the new institutional economics, two paradigms that ostensibly draw inspiration from traditional Keynesianism and "old" institutionalism but in practice constitute only limited revisions, and, some would argue, rehabilitations of neoclassical economics.

5. Stratification Economics and Neoclassical Economics

Stratification economics' emphasis on power, racial hierarchies, and historical and institutional contingencies, offers a clear distinction from the marginalist approach of neoclassical economics, and its dynamic emphasis on the strategic roles of group identification and affiliation represents a clear departure from the paradigmatic foundations of new Keynesian and new institutional economics (see for example Chelwa, Hamilton, and Green's 2023 elaboration on what the spectrum of economics gets wrong with a lack of identity-group stratification lens). Stratification economics accords a primary importance to intergroup rather than individual rivalry: individuals are, above all, members of social groups, and market participants are not "naked" actors but are embedded in social contexts that filter through their utility functions and, consequently, determine market outcomes. More specifically, stratification economics does not abandon the tools of neoclassical economics, it expands them. It is interdisciplinary in thought and methods, it is empirically driven, its modern origin is largely reactionary to the dearth of empirical evidence to support neoclassical inequality claims, and it is less dogmatic and more explicit in its values, in stark contrast with the myopic chauvinism and concealed dogma of neoclassical economics.

Stratification economics may take its starting point in the shortcoming of neoclassical economics, but it now goes far beyond that. It addresses shortcoming in any political economic framing or analysis devoid of identity analyses. In this regard, approaches that remain too tethered to neoclassical economics inherit its conceptual limitations.

Chelwa, Hamilton, and Green (2023) demonstrate the necessity of formally incorporating identity group stratification as a pillar alongside economic and political understandings of any political economy framework. We make our case by juxtaposing mutual inadequacies and myopic limitations associated with two influential but polar economic frameworks – Marxian and public choice theory – since neither framework formally incorporates an identity group stratification lens beyond class reductionism. In addition to presenting an identity group stratification lens to economic thought, we present an Inclusive Economic Rights policy framework as a critical baseline component of human rights, foregrounding political economic tendencies toward identity group stratifications as a pathway forward to achieve a "moral political economy."

Regardless of ideology, economics, politics, and social stratification (as measured by class, race, gender, nativity, and other markers of identity) have never been separable. As inequality continues to grow, both within and across nation-states, the economics profession and society writ large need to move beyond the overly simplistic Marxist framework that reduces group struggle to one of class, as well as the neoliberal orthodox economic framework that centers markets and individual choice devoid of adequate understanding of resource, power, and distribution. We need new thinking that recognizes the strategic incentives and disincentives associated with group sorting beyond class, with an ultimate goal of generating a moral political economy grounded in fairness, justice, and shared prosperity.

All of this raises an important question: has the incorporation of stratification economics into the mainstream begun, or do stratification scholars simply enjoy greater visibility in mainstream institutions and outlets – or both? At the very least, one might say that a form of intellectual courtship has begun. It is not yet clear who is courting whom; this volume suggests that it may well be a mutual process. Hopefully, this courtship will lead to a "honeymoon" during which more empirical, theoretical, and historical work in stratification economics finds its way into premier general-interest and field journals. Another significant step would be the attribution of a dedicated JEL code, rather than subsuming the subfield under the broad Z13 category. As this process unfolds, it is crucial to ensure that the core principles of stratification economics, first articulated by Du Bois, are neither forgotten nor distorted.

Francis and Myers's essay delivers a valuable overview of the many traditions that guided the development of stratification economics. Their survey invites a closer examination of the respective contributions of various actors, as these contributions do not all carry the same weight. It also calls for a deeper discussion of the linkages among the key intellectual building blocks that informed the subfield's development.

It is no coincidence that Du Bois has been lost in the narrative as the progenitor of stratification economics. Nor is it a coincidence that Stewart, with all his grace and humility, has been overlooked in prior accounts of the subfield's development, or that the contributions of Black economists trained at MIT have been undervalued. Taken together, these omissions reflect the dominance of a particular kind of economics, one that carries its own values and worldview and stands in sharp contrast to the commitments to human dignity and truth advanced by stratification economics. To believe that scholarship can be separated from politics is a profound mistake.

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