1

Theory

Utopia and Anti-Utopia

As a science sociology is unusual in that it refuses to forget its founders. How is it that we continue to draw inspiration from three European men – Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – from the nineteenth century? From the standpoint of the present they have their inevitable blind spots: a limited focus on questions of race and gender; an often naïve belief in science; and a Eurocentric outlook on the world. They were very much a product of their era and its assumptions.

Indeed, Raewyn Connell (1997) has argued that these so-called classical sociologists had a limited vision of their own times and were arbitrarily chosen after World War II to represent the canon. Upon their shoulders rests the edifice of modern sociology, thereby eclipsing the contributions of a myriad social thinkers from outside Europe. Whereas sister-disciplines like anthropology, economics, and political science have reduced their founders to mere historical interest, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim hang on as obligatory but also inspirational reference points for sociology. Prominent contemporaries, Pierre Bourdieu or Jürgen Habermas, built their social theory on the basis of the same founding figures, implicitly in the case of the first and explicitly in the case of the second. Attempts at building alternative foundations, such as James Coleman's rational choice

theory, never made much headway or gained many adherents.

There is, however, one candidate with irrefutable credentials, around whom it is possible to reconstruct the canon – W. E. B. Du Bois. An African American born ten years after Durkheim and four years after Weber, he is of their generation but outlived them by nearly half a century. Educated at Fisk, Harvard, and the University of Berlin, Du Bois pioneered urban sociology at Atlanta University before launching into a public career as a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), editor of *The Crisis* magazine, and ~~propagator~~ of Pan-Africanism. In 1934 he returned to Atlanta University to complete his extraordinary history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. As he became ever more hostile to the US state that persecuted him, he moved further leftwards, endorsing the socialist vision represented by the Soviet Union and "Communist" China, and ending his life in newly independent Ghana. As a novelist and poet (Du Bois 1911, 1928) he gave sociological theory a uniquely utopian twist that imagined the transcendence of racial and gender domination as well as class exploitation, an optimism always qualified by an anti-utopian science that tragically spelled out the limits of social transformation.

Changing the canon is not simply a matter of adding him to or replacing Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. A canon is always more than the sum of its parts. It refers to a configuration of relations among its members. Du Bois's historically rooted, engaged sociology calls for a reconfiguration of the canon, foregrounding its public and critical dimensions, advancing the duality of utopian imagination and anti-utopian science. I start with the continuing significance of the relations among Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, before pointing to a new canon that incorporates Du Bois's publicly engaged and historically embedded sociology.

The Canon That Was

In whatever ways they may be seen as a product of their times, the founders also rose above their times to speak to the abiding problems of modern society. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are exemplary not only for their insights into the social world, not only for the methods they used to explore that world, but also for the distinctive way they upheld a science rooted in values. Each managed to establish social constraints – that is, they were anti-utopian, opposing the optimism that anything was possible – but at the same time, they sought to bring the world under human guidance, opposing the pessimistic view that what exists is natural and inevitable. Their sociology was many things, not least a dialogue between its utopian and anti-utopian impulses.

Durkheim's utopia, first spelled out in his 1893 dissertation, *The Division of Labor in Society*, was one in which every individual would find their niche in the division of labor. They would feel at one with the world they inhabited through their mutual interdependence and their contribution to the end product, what he called *organic solidarity*. This would only be possible in a society that offered unimpeded *equality of opportunity* so that everyone has the chance to assume an occupation best suited to their specific talents and abilities. The realization of such a society – a meritocracy – would, however, require radical change: the elimination of unmerited advantages associated with the *"forced" division of labor* in which individuals find themselves in positions for which they are ill-suited. Eliminating the forced division of labor required the end of the inheritance of wealth, but we know today that in addition to economic wealth, cultural wealth (family upbringing, primary socialization) is no less important in determining where in society we end up. To replace the forced division of labor with a meritocracy would require transforming our educational system so as

to cancel the abiding effects of social inequalities based on race, class, and gender. Affirmative action aims to counteract such inherited inequalities, while such projects as the Harlem Children's Zone attempt the equalization of opportunities from an early age.

Already a radical project, Durkheim's organic solidarity went even further. Believing that integration into society required not just equality of opportunity, he proposed the elimination of *unjustified inequalities of power*. Workers, he said, would only feel part of the workplace if they were on the same footing as their employer, that is, if they did not fear arbitrary firing, if their boss could not lord it over them. This would call for state regulation of employment relations, as well as state guarantees of minimal existence in the face of unemployment. Employers would have to organize the cooperation of their workers without wielding the threat of dismissal. And if employers were to go out of business, workers and their families would not become destitute but would still obtain a basic standard of living. Thus, today Durkheim might be an advocate of universal basic income – an income unconditionally distributed to all adults that would enable them to subsist. One could envision Durkheim upholding the principles of social democracy that have been approximated in Scandinavian countries. Arguably, Durkheim's vision proposed more than a century ago is both more necessary and more remote today in a world of crushing inequalities of wealth and power and mounting precarity.

Durkheim had a broader vision, a form of guild socialism with the occupational associational as its elemental form. While he advanced the idea of a regulatory state to minimize unjust inequality, he argued that occupational corporations would organize production and inherit property, supplanting the family as the basic unit of society. Durkheim's utopian "normal" division of labor emerged from his anti-utopian analysis of the actually existing "abnormal forms" that impose external constraints on human action. The abnormal forms included not only

the forced division of labor rooted in the unjustified and unequal distribution of resources, but also the anomic division of labor in which rapid social change gives rise to states of disorientation (normlessness) and a third abnormal form in which the different parts of society are badly coordinated.

Karl Marx, who never knew Durkheim, would have brought his own anti-utopianism to bear on the idea of organic solidarity and evolutionary progress. He would scoff at the very possibility of realizing such a fantasy under capitalism. The obstacles to organic solidarity, namely, the "external" inequalities of power and wealth, are deeply inscribed in the structure of capitalism: they will not dissolve without a revolution that would overthrow vested interests, especially class interests, in defending capitalism. Durkheim has no way of getting from here to there, from the abnormal to the normal division of labor. Such would be the critique of Karl Marx.

Marx would turn his anti-utopianism against Durkheim's project, but he would also offer an alternative utopia. Thus, Durkheim's guild socialism should not be confused with Marx's communism. Where Durkheim was concerned to *perfect* the division of labor by slotting people into their appropriate places, Marx wanted to *abolish* the division of labor altogether. Slotting people into places crushes their potential to develop rich and varied abilities. They are alienated from their essential being: they don't control what they produce or how they produce it; they don't control the relations through which they produce things. They cannot, in other words, develop their humanity, what Marx and other critical theorists of his time called their "species being."

The barrier to such a world of emancipation is capitalism itself, the incessant pursuit of profit through novel ways of exploiting workers. If they are to survive, capitalists have to compete for profit. They are as trapped by the market as workers who have to sell their capacity to work, their labor power, by the minute, by the hour. His critique of

the forces that have hitherto imprisoned humanity led him to conceive of an alternative world of communism that supersedes capitalism – a world free of unnecessary products, from automobiles to nuclear weapons, a world free of unnecessary labor of control and surveillance, a world free of the excessive waste built into capitalism. Freedom from all of these would allow us to reduce the length of the working week, leaving us ample time and space to develop those rich and varied abilities in what he called the "true realm of freedom." As is increasingly recognized, only such a radical transformation of capitalism can avoid the impending human extinction that will come with global warming.

Marx and his lifelong collaborator, Friedrich Engels, clearly saw the virtues of capitalism whose dynamism generated the technology – the forces of production – that made the reduction of the working week possible. Over time, again by its own logic, capitalism destroyed small businesses and concentrated ownership into the hands of large conglomerates and the state, creating the foundations of a planned economy – an economy that would be run and owned collectively, superseding markets and private property. Equally important, capitalism also creates its own gravedigger, in the form of a working class determined to overthrow capitalism and end alienation. The genius of Marx was to discover the laws that bring about the self-destruction of competitive capitalism: competition among capitalists would intensify the exploitation of labor, which would, on the one hand, lead to crises of overproduction and a falling rate of profit, and, on the other hand, assure the organizational ascendancy of the working class. In other words, as economic crises deepened, capitalism enlarged, deskilled, homogenized, and impoverished the working class, forging it into a revolutionary movement that would seize power and turn capitalism into socialism. The utopian and anti-utopian moments finally converge in the miraculous transcendence of capitalism.

Despite their homage to capitalism, Marx and Engels still underestimated its resilience. Their mistake was to believe that the end of competitive capitalism was the end of all capitalism; they failed to anticipate the transition to a new form of capitalism, organized capitalism, orchestrated by a regulatory state that counteracts the crisis tendencies of capitalism – regulating competition, limiting exploitation, and absorbing surplus. Today, there are forces within capitalist society trying to cast off the encumbering state – the very entity that protects capitalism from itself – thereby restoring capitalism's self-destructive tendencies that are as likely to lead to some form of barbarism as communism. Marx's anti-utopian thinking, founded in the atrocities of nineteenth-century textile factories as well as the slavery upon which the cotton industry depended, both of which fed the inexorable expanded reproduction of capitalism, has gained the upper hand as his utopia recedes from the public imagination. Yet we are living in a time when his utopian vision is so desperately needed. As Fredric Jameson (2003: 76) has said, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

We seem, therefore, to be living more in the world conjured up by Max Weber, who mobilized his immense erudition to trace the origins of modern capitalism, precisely because he saw it as an all-conquering expression of a largely irreversible rationalization. Focusing on the obstacles to radical change, he was explicitly skeptical of all utopias, but specifically the Marxist variety. Any attempt at overthrowing capitalism would lead to a horrific world, a dystopia. For Weber the irony of history was the inverse of Marx's optimistic thesis of capitalist self-destruction leading to emancipation. On the contrary, in Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for example, individuals start out by acting freely but in the process unintentionally create iron cages for themselves, epitomized by his notion of bureaucracy, the most efficient organization ever invented but also the most indestructible form of domination. Weber was prophetic in

anticipating the spread and resilience of institutions bound by rules, discipline, hierarchy, and linear careers. Seeking to overthrow bureaucracy only gives rise to a stronger bureaucracy, endangering liberal-democratic safeguards against its expansion. Socialism, Weber anticipated, would not be the democratic dictatorship of the working class but the authoritarian dictatorship of officials.

Even as he was anti-utopian, Weber, too, harbored a concept of his own utopia – although it was far less radical than the utopias of Durkheim and Marx. According to Weber, it was not possible to perfect the division of labor by securing to each their appropriate place, nor was it possible to abolish the division of labor through transcending capitalism. The best one can do is to treat one's occupation with total devotion. His model was the seventeenth-century Calvinist who considered such devotion to one's occupation as a necessary part of their calling to glorify God on earth. Facing predestination – not knowing whether one was among the damned or the elect – created a deep anxiety, only alleviated by searching for signs of a job well done. In the case of the capitalist, it entailed that most "irrational" of pursuits, accumulation for accumulation's sake, profit for profit's sake, money for money's sake; in the case of the laborer, treating work as an end in itself, instilling the so-called work ethic. Thus, Calvinism gave rise to this spirit of capitalism – that crucial ingredient for the birth of modern capitalism.

The Calvinist is the prototype – or to use Weber's term, the ideal-type – of the modern individual who makes a virtue of necessity through dedication to a life project pursued under uncertain external constraints. Weber makes a similar point in his two famous essays on science and politics, originally addressed to students in 1917 and 1919. Politicians driven by a cause must recognize the radical uncertainty of ever achieving their goal. He describes the inner tension between an ethic of absolute ends involving the single-minded pursuit of a cause irrespective of the consequences and an ethic of

responsibility in which the politician takes those consequences into consideration. That's the utopian moment. On the other hand, the politician operates in an institutional context of bureaucracy, party system, and economy that easily subverts the noblest of intentions. "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards" ([1919] 1994: 128).

Weber's limited utopia of "vocation" is the pursuit of a goal whose realization is uncertain, recognizing the anti-utopianism of social constraint – the politician propelled by a mission without guarantees of success. There is a utopian perfection to every occupation – the machine operator, the window cleaner, the domestic worker, the artist, the doctor, the farmer, the manager – whose very unattainability drives commitment. That commitment gives meaning, even to the most mundane activities. As Weber said, it was also true of the scientist. Driven by the puzzles of a research program – puzzles that have meaning only to the cognoscenti – scientists never know whether or when insight will strike. Passionate devotion is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. It is as if breakthroughs lie in the hands of the Calvinist God outside the control of the humble scientist. This devotion to an elusive goal is no less irrational than the pursuit of profit for profit's sake. In both cases any breakthrough, whether new technology or new discovery, is sure to be superseded and forgotten. The only satisfaction is of a job well done, a puzzle solved, a momentary elation, perhaps some honorific recognition. As Weber wrote, not only the intrinsic uncertainty of puzzle-solving but the very institutions of science often favor mediocrity over originality, and are often subject to hostile political regulation. The odds are against us; all we can do is to infuse meaning into our science.

When Weber is at his most bleak after Germany's defeat in World War I, he is driven to assert a utopian moment in uncharacteristically strong terms: "man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible" ([1919] 1994: 128). The darkest

days, the most pessimistic times, call out for utopian thinking. When anti-utopia is veering toward dystopia, then the antidote to despair is to remind ourselves how the world has been otherwise in the past and, therefore, how the world could be otherwise in the future.

Reconstructing the Canon

W. E. B. Du Bois would never be satisfied with Weber's bleak prognosis. Making the best of a bad situation was for him a dystopia, personified by his political enemy, Booker T. Washington. Born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Du Bois grew up in a largely white community and absorbed its Protestant ways. Sponsored by the local community, he went to Fisk University, and from there went to Harvard, where he received a second undergraduate degree and then became the first African American to receive a PhD for his study of the suppression of the slave trade in the US (Du Bois [1896] 2007). He also studied at the University of Berlin, 1892–94, where he witnessed and engaged with the birth of sociology.

Within professional sociology he became known for *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), a detailed ethnographic study of African Americans in Philadelphia, often seen as the foundation stone of US urban sociology. Although there's no evidence that he had read Durkheim, it reads like an exemplification of the latter's abnormal division of labor, only applied to a racially divided society: on the one side, inequality of opportunity and unequal power, and on the other side a state of anomie resulting from the recent emancipation from slavery and then migration from the South. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903: 5), a collection of lyrical essays on the abysmal conditions in the South, Du Bois famously presents the idea of double consciousness: "This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. … The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain

self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self." The striving is to be a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture." The essays are an appeal to the common humanity of Black and white, the forging of a common consciousness through education and religion. The solution to the racial division of labor lies in the cultivation and recognition of African American leaders like himself, the so-called talented tenth. At this point Du Bois has a Durkheimian diagnosis and solution to the racial division of labor, but one without a socialist vision. That is yet to come.

Indeed, as Du Bois became disillusioned by the reception of his ideas, as his work at Atlanta University was largely ignored, as racism became more intractable both in society and in science, as he became more involved in the struggle for racial equality in the Niagara Movement (that prefigured the NAACP that he co-founded), and as he became more influenced by socialist ideas of the time, he became less Durkheimian and more Marxian. In writing the biography of John Brown, leader of an anti-slavery insurrection that prefigured the Civil War, he emphasized a history made from below, so different from his earlier conciliatory politics of assimilation. The mantra of Du Bois's (1909) *John Brown* was: the cost of liberty is less than the price of repression. In other words, the loss of life in fighting slavery is small compared to the atrocities inflicted on slaves.

Darkwater (1920), another collection of remarkable essays, departed from the moral appeals of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Now addressing African Americans, he turns to the souls of white folk and the barbarism they perpetuate in the name of white supremacy, locally and globally. Du Bois now developed a theory of racial capitalism to place the 1917 race riot in East St. Louis in world historical perspective – that was the anti-utopian sociology. At the same time, he advanced a utopian idea of industrial democracy. Moving beyond his early campaign for extending suffrage based on voting qualifications, he

advanced a notion of participatory democracy based on the unique and divergent experiences of different groups. Genuine democracy would also require its own economic foundations – freedom from exhausting and demeaning labor. Accordingly, Du Bois proposed the elimination of menial service labor, following the sort of mechanization that had taken place in industry. He wrote of the struggle for women's emancipation led by such heroic African American figures as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Phillis Wheatley, prefiguring the notions of intersectionality that would arrive fifty years later. The reformism of the early years has given way to a radicalism – both in the attention paid to entrenched racial capitalism and in the exploration of alternatives.

In Du Bois's writings utopian and anti-utopian themes reinforced each other in a deepening spiral, reaching a climax in his 1935 masterpiece *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. This was a radical rewriting of the history of both the Civil War and the post-war Reconstruction. Famously, he argued that victory for the North was made possible by fugitive slaves joining the Federal army as it was becoming war-weary. Harking back to Marx and his writings on the American Civil War, Du Bois called the desertion from slavery a "general strike," thereby associating slaves with a revolutionary working class. Reconstruction after the Civil War ended when the North abandoned its support for Black emancipation, restoring the power of the Southern planter class that set about imposing new forms of forced labor along with Jim Crow segregation.

But Reconstruction itself was far from the unmitigated disaster painted by historians. In Du Bois's detailed account, the play of political forces harbored possibilities of an inter-racial, radical democracy, albeit varying from state to state depending on historical legacies, racial demographics, and class structure. It was only in the 1960s that historians began to accept the essential truth of Du Bois's redemption of the place of African Americans in

US history. In Du Bois's view, Reconstruction was the last opportunity to transcend race before the consolidation of racial capitalism. As he was writing *Black Reconstruction* during the Depression, Du Bois abandoned the pursuit of immediate integration of African Americans and instead advocated the development of Black autonomy through independent cooperatives, the basis of a cooperative commonwealth. This occasioned another break with the more staid NAACP, which did not waver from a narrow interpretation of "integration."

In the post-war period, as matters looked bleak at home, Du Bois would turn his attention to possibilities abroad. On the one hand, there was his longstanding leadership role in the Pan-African movement that had become ever more real with the major Pan-African Conference of 1945, attended by future leaders of African independence movements. In *The World and Africa* (1947) he developed Marx's idea of the fetishism of commodities, underlining how invisibly interconnected were the plundering of Africa and the accumulation of wealth in the capitalist West. His global vision took him in another direction – to become an important advocate in the International Peace Movement that was supported by the Soviet Union and opposed by the US state. His defense of the Soviet Union harks back to his first visit in 1926, but his support for "communism" intensified in the post-war period, fueled by the Chinese Revolution. He turned a blind eye to the repressive features of these states, impressed instead by their determined effort to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality.

Although far more radical than Weber, Du Bois, like Weber, recognized that electoral democracy did little to rectify social injustice. Indeed, as he himself experienced, despite its claims to universality, the "democratic" state could deepen injustices. Condemned to be an enemy of the US state, Du Bois confronted its repressive character. For almost a decade he was stripped of his passport, denying him travel abroad. During this period he became closer to

members of the Communist Party, actively campaigning for wider civil rights. In the end, he would thumb his nose at the US state, join the Communist Party and leave for newly independent Ghana, where he lived as a citizen for the last three years of his life. He died in 1963 on the eve of the civil rights March on Washington.

How should we place Du Bois in the canon of sociology? In his *The Scholar Denied* (2015) Aldon Morris argues that Du Bois was the true progenitor of urban sociology in the US – his Atlanta School predated and outclassed the so-called Chicago School that had claimed foundational status. Racism excluded him from the major sociology departments and limited his access to resources, yet he was still able to build a thriving school of sociology at Atlanta University, making major contributions to professional sociology. While other African Americans were able to make careers in academia, such as E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson, they did so by going along with the dominant tropes that Du Bois rejected. Nor were they so politically active as public figures. Du Bois had a critical disposition that he expressed in public interventions, making him too radical for the social science of the period.

So it would turn out, ironically, that the racism he studied was also the racism that made academia so inhospitable, that drove him into the public sphere, where, for twenty-four years, he became editor of *The Crisis*, one of the great political and cultural magazines of the twentieth century. That gave him a platform for public engagement: whether it was his work documenting and opposing lynching, his key role in the formation of NAACP, his critical engagement with the Harlem Renaissance, his devoted organization of Pan-Africanism, or his opposition to both Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. He was able to speak out in another register with his two novels, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928), playing off utopian and anti-utopian themes. From "scholar denied" he became "scholar unbound," lucidly illuminated in his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* (1940).

Max Weber insisted on a watertight separation of science and politics – the two were governed by opposed logics and confined to divergent arenas. Perhaps Weber's views reflected a period when the university was embattled, when science was still a vulnerable, fledgling pursuit. Although Weber practiced public sociology – including the public lectures he gave at the invitation of students at the University of Munich that were the foundation of his two essays on science and politics – it had no place in his theorization of politics, where he tended to dismiss publics as misguided. The idea of civil society supporting a public sphere was only thinly developed in his work. Du Bois, by contrast, transcended the division between science and politics in both theory and practice. He gave public sociology pride of place in his vision of sociology, not antagonistic to professional, critical, and policy sociologies but as the driving force behind them. This was yet another reason why he was spurned by the professional cadres, and why today his inclusion within the canon redefines the very meaning of sociology.