

The Sociology of Utopia, Modern Temporality and Black Visions of Liberation

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Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between the sociology of utopia and Black visions of liberation. Influential figures from Karl Mannheim to Ruth Levitas have effectively demonstrated the value of a utopian perspective for sociology. However, the African American tradition of utopianism has been largely overlooked in this literature. I argue that the Black standpoint forces a rethinking of the sociological understanding of utopia. More specifically, while most sociologists of utopia straightforwardly associate the desire for a better world with the future, the Black tradition proposes a more expansive understanding of utopia's temporality. Building on visions of new worlds advanced by WEB Du Bois and the movement for reparations for slavery, I suggest that Black utopia involves a glance backwards to the past, such that the image of a better future is accompanied by the memory of the catastrophe of slavery.

Keywords

decolonial theory, race, reparations, social theory, temporality, utopia, WEB Du Bois

Introduction

Ruth Levitas (1979: 31), writing in *Sociology*, noted that: 'It has not become impossible to imagine utopias; but it has become difficult to imagine utopia as possible – which paradoxically makes it possible to be more utopian.' The notion of possibility is at the heart of the study of utopia from a sociological perspective. Scholars in other disciplines are concerned with the imagination of new and better worlds, with philosophers explicating the structure of hopeful desires (Bloch, 1986), intellectual historians drawing out the preconditions for the emergence of utopian consciousness (Davis, 1981) and literary critics tracing the shifting contours of fictional visions of alternative social orders (Jameson, 2005). However, if there is something distinctive about attempts to think *sociology and utopia*

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together, it is the impulse to demonstrate that a better world is possible. That is to say, there are forces within society that tend towards the realisation of a liberated world. Utopia, which can be simply defined as ‘the desire for a better way of being’, is not a mere wish but immanent to the social order as it presently exists (Levitas, 2013: xii).

To substantiate this claim, we can turn to four of the most prominent attempts to think about utopia from a sociological perspective. Karl Mannheim (1936: 173), in his famous reflections on ideology and utopia, examined social movements, ranging from the peasant revolutionaries of the early modern period to the modern labour movement, that ‘tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time’. For Mannheim, the task is to study how the desire for a new world acts as a catalyst for social change. A similar perspective is adopted by Zygmunt Bauman (1976), who suggests that socialism is the active utopia of modernity; the former draws out the liberatory potential of the latter, such that a society of substantive equality and freedom is dormant in the contours of the capitalist present. More recently, Erik Olin Wright (2012: 2), with his notion of real utopias, argues for a ‘sociology of the possible’ that focuses on the elaboration of alternative social institutions that can be implemented in the contemporary moment. Finally, Levitas (2013: xvii, emphases in original) has articulated a utopian method that is oriented around the ‘*archaeological*’ task of discerning the hopeful desires circulating in society and the ‘*architectural*’ task of elaborating concrete and realisable visions of new and better worlds.

Now, at least within the North American and European traditions, it would be wrong to say that utopia has been central to the sociological endeavour. As a number of scholars stress, in sociology, analysing and understanding actually existing society tends to take precedence over the articulation of utopian worlds (Dawson, 2016; Jacobsen and Tester, 2012; Levitas, 2013). HG Wells’s (1906a: 367) claim, voiced at the beginning of the 20th century, that ‘the creation of Utopias [. . .] is the proper and distinctive method of sociology’ has found little support among most sociologists (see Levitas, 2010). Certainly, a concern with utopia is sometimes *implicit* in sociology. Calls for a public sociology focused on building a better society (Burawoy, 2005), conceptualisations of the relationship between social theory and alternative futures (Urry, 2016) and proposals for speculative research attuned to the non-actualised possibilities of society (Savransky et al., 2017) all touch on utopia. Nevertheless, there are few *explicit* accounts of the relationship between utopia and sociology beyond those advanced by Mannheim, Bauman, Wright and Levitas (see Dawson, 2016; Goodwin, 1978; Jacobsen and Tester, 2012). So, when I refer to the sociology of utopia in this article, I am primarily talking about the contributions of these four theorists.

While utopia may have been of relatively marginal concern in sociology, it has been subject to in-depth consideration from literary critics, intellectual historians and political philosophers working in the interdisciplinary field of utopian studies (for a recent overview, see Sargent, 2021). Insights from scholars working in other disciplines have the potential to enrich the sociology of utopia. In particular, there has been increasing interest in the relationship between utopia and race in recent decades. As a number of studies demonstrate, in the most famous utopias – such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (2002 [1516]), Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (2007 [1888]) and Ursula K Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (2000 [1974]) – white Europeans are responsible for building the ideal

society, while non-European peoples are either excluded from the liberatory schema entirely, understood to passively follow the utopian example described or subject to forms of domination and violence (Ahmad, 2009; Balasopoulos, 2004; Bell, 2020; Marouby, 1988). Moreover, there are significant, though often overlooked, currents of non-European utopianism that challenge the exclusions of white utopianism, advancing images of new worlds that are explicitly concerned with racial justice (Ashcroft, 2016; Dutton, 2010; Pordzik, 2001). The freedom dreams articulated by Black Americans – whether directed against slavery in the 19th century, segregation in the 20th century or police killings in the 21st century – are especially instructive in this regard, providing hopeful accounts of alternative societies where racial violence has been overcome (Brown, 2021; Kelley, 2002; Sargent, 2020; Womack, 2013; Zamalin, 2019). Building on this literature, in this article, I look to Black utopias to critique and reconstitute the sociology of utopia.

From the perspective of this work on the relationship between race and utopia, some of the limitations of *sociological* accounts of utopia become apparent. In particular, among sociologists of utopia, there is a tendency to associate the desire for liberation with radical socio-economic change. Mannheim (1936) examines a range of class-based movements, Bauman (1976) focuses on the dreams of the proletariat and Wright (2010) and Levitas (2013) propose a range of reforms designed to reboot socialism for the 21st century. However, utopian visions that specifically address questions of racial equality are largely missing from the sociological literature. Symptomatic in this regard is Wright's (2012: 9) comment that affirmative action is 'one of the critical policies for combating the pernicious effects of ongoing racism' but is not 'a building block of a world of racial justice and emancipation'. However, among Wright's (2012: 9) utopian proposals there are no institutional forms that would offer an 'emancipatory alternative' to white supremacy; the question of race is briefly raised, then quickly dropped.

This lack of dialogue between utopian sociology and race is a problem. Generally speaking, the decolonial turn in sociology in the last decade poses a challenge to the sociology of utopia as it is presently constituted (for an overview, see Meghji, 2021). On this perspective, social theoretical concepts need to be rethought to draw out their latent connection to histories of colonial power and racial domination (Bhambra, 2014; Go, 2016). If other key concepts of modernity, from citizenship (Bhambra, 2015) to nostalgia (Tinsley, 2020), have been marked by these histories, why not utopia? More specifically, I am not the first to notice the lacuna regarding race in the literature on the sociology of utopia. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012: 3) emphasises that a major failing of Wright's sociology of utopia is its 'lack of serious engagement with race and race matters'; it operates on the tacit belief that socio-economic transformation would result in a world of racial equality. In a similar fashion, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2020: 576) notes that many of the utopian schemes imagined by Wright are only viable 'in the metropolitan domain of sociality' but not the 'colonial zone'.

At first glance, these criticisms might be relatively easily addressed. The insights of the sociology of utopia do not only pertain to the contents of the new world but also the *processes* and *methods* by which images of liberated societies can be identified and produced. The latter can be expanded beyond the standard socio-economic concerns of utopian sociologists to encompass visions of racial justice. For instance, what happens if we

turn Levitas's (2013: 153) method, which begins with the archaeological act of 'piecing together the images of the good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies', to the Black Lives Matter movement? In the aftermath of the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of African American organisations, produced a comprehensive policy platform, including plans for reparations for the harms of slavery and its aftermath, divestment from the police and investment in Black communities, an economy that serves the people and not corporations, and greater community control and self-determination (Newkirk, 2016). Although the policy programme does not offer a totalising image of a new society, the flashes of an alternative are evident; there are moments of hope waiting to be excavated via Levitas's archaeological method.

However, while it is certainly necessary to bring demands for racial justice into dialogue with the sociology of utopia, it is also insufficient. An adequate response to the exclusion of race requires a more fundamental rethinking of the implicit assumptions about utopia found in the existing sociological literature on the topic. In particular, as I argue in this article, there is a discrepancy between the *temporal shape* characteristically attributed to utopia and that which is found in Black visions of new worlds. The sociology of utopia associates liberation, in a relatively straightforward fashion, with the future, positing that the realisation of a fulfilled world is to be achieved via a progressive movement through time. By contrast, Black visions of liberation critique this association between utopia and the future and articulate a more expansive understanding of utopian temporality. In the African American tradition, a place for the memory of slavery and its aftermath must be found within the alternative society imagined; past and future need to be held together. Black utopias, then, 'exist "after the future"', blossoming in spite of what presently seems destined to be the future'; they question and contest the dominant conception of the time-to-come in European modernity (Keeling, 2019: 36).

To make this argument, I begin by considering the relationship between utopia and temporality, first analysing the tendency to imagine visions of new worlds in the future and then counterposing this to the more complex articulation of utopian temporality offered by Mannheim. In the next section, I turn to the Black tradition of utopian imagination, beginning with a neglected utopian sociologist: WEB Du Bois (1920), and in particular his short story 'The Comet'. In this story, Du Bois criticises the progressive arc of history, suggesting that a futural world of racial equality will not be truly utopian if it fails to account for the lingering presence of slavery and segregation. Then, building on Wright's work, I examine how this distinctive temporality can be translated into real utopian terms. Reparations for slavery are posited as a realisable liberatory demand that mediates between the past and the future.

Before turning to this argument, it is first worth reflecting on why the focus in this article is on expressions of utopia in the African American tradition of social thought. It should be stressed that utopianism is a global phenomenon. For example, postcolonial visions of new worlds, many of which criticise the racism of the European colonial project, have been articulated in recent decades (Ashcroft, 2016). This article only focuses on one tendency in the broader movement of anti-racist utopianism. However, the tradition of Black utopianism is a generative case study for two reasons. First, the pivotal place of Du Bois in Black utopianism (Zamalin, 2019), early American sociology

(Morris, 2015) and decolonial sociology (Burawoy, 2021; Weiner, 2018) means that ‘The Comet’ is a useful bridging point between utopia, sociology and race. Second, Afrofuturism, a movement focused on bringing together science fiction and the culture of the African diaspora (Womack, 2013), has become increasingly prominent in popular culture, something demonstrated by the success of the film *Black Panther* (2018) and Beyoncé’s visual album *Black Is King* (2020). The utopias of the African American tradition, at least within North America, have been at the forefront of elaborating a nascent unease with the implicit whiteness of utopian imaginaries.

The Temporalisation of Utopia

It is first worth outlining the contours of the relationship between sociology, utopia and the future. The sociologists of utopia discussed above, for the most part, associate images of better worlds with the temporal category of the future. Levitas (2013: 83, 19) puts this especially clearly, stating that the utopian perspective offers a ‘speculative sociology of the future’; the act of unearthing the latent lines of development in contemporary society involving the projection of a range of ‘alternative possible scenarios for the future’. Visions of new worlds, in this sense, are ‘anticipated end-products’ of a temporal movement; the future can be made radically different from the past (Bauman, 2003: 16). Emblematic of this association between utopia and the future is Bauman’s *Retropia* (2017), one of his final books. In this text, Bauman considers the resurgence of nostalgia in recent decades, considering the meaning and function of idealised visions of the past that circulate in contemporary culture. Importantly, the relationship between nostalgia and utopia is understood in zero-sum terms: the more of the former, the less of the latter, and vice versa.¹ This becomes clear when Bauman (2017: 123) contrasts ‘the early-modern, positive, boisterous, assertive and self-confident utopia’ and ‘the present-day diffident, dejected and defeatist retropia’. The turn to the past is identified with a movement away from utopia; it acts as a drag on efforts to build an alternative world in the future.

It should be stressed here that there is nothing specific about the association between utopia and the future in these sociological accounts. The sociology of utopia reflects a broader cultural understanding of the temporality of utopia. The dominant time consciousness of European modernity pairs the future with novelty and alterity, something demonstrated by the rise of ideas of progress and revolution in the 18th century (Assmann, 2020; Hartog, 2015). Prior to this point, the future (at least within secular history) was understood to involve repetition. For instance, on the circular conception of history, past events would eventually recur in the future, while on the exemplary conception of history, the best had already happened and the past provided standards for the future. By contrast, for modern time consciousness, the future is understood in terms of ‘the nonrepeatable’; it contains novel phenomena that have no precedent in the past (Hartog, 2015: 105). It is no accident that the ‘temporalization of utopia’ coincided with the rise of modern time consciousness (Koselleck, 2002: 85; see also Baczko, 1989). While the utopias of the early modern period were primarily spatial in form, their accounts of new social orders located elsewhere in the world, as in the vision of an isolated island in Thomas More’s *Utopia* (2002 [1516]), in the 18th and 19th centuries, the future became

the key location for utopian fiction, something represented by Louis-Sébastien Mercier's image of Paris in the 25th century in *L'An 2440* [*The Year 2440*] (1971 [1771]) and William Morris's London of the 22nd century in *News from Nowhere* (1995 [1890]). Once the future was identified with novelty and alterity, it became the ideal site to place an alternative, utopian world.

The shift from space to time suggests that, though there is a strong historical association between utopia and the future, there is nothing *necessary* about this relationship. There are forms of utopianism that do not rely on the temporal movement from the degraded present to the liberated future. Importantly, the 'time maps' of utopia – the particular way in which past, present and future are concatenated in visions of new worlds – do not only vary historically but also between different groups within society (Zerubavel, 2003: 109). This variable relationship between temporality and utopia is made clear by Mannheim (1936) in *Ideologie und Utopie* [*Ideology and Utopia*], which was first published in 1929. While Mannheim's book is a classic text of 20th-century sociology, his account of utopia is the least discussed section of the study.² This is a shame, not least because it contains a series of instructive comments on the relationship between social hope and temporal consciousness.

Each of the four modes of utopia identified by Mannheim (1936) – millenarian, liberal-humanitarian, conservative and socialist-communist – articulates a distinct 'historical time-sense' (1936: 189). The millenarian desire to bring heaven down to earth is focused on 'the immediate present', with the German peasant revolutionaries of the 16th century enlivened by the expectation of a sudden and abrupt 'swing into another kind of existence' (1936: 195). The liberal-humanitarianism of the 18th and 19th centuries posited a progressive movement towards the utopian world of the future, such that the latter is understood as 'the culminating point of historical evolution' (1936: 202). If the millenarians are focused on the present and the liberals the future, then conservative visions of utopia are oriented around the past; they aim to safeguard and augment that which has come into existence 'slowly and gradually' (1936: 211–212). Finally, the socialist-communist mode of utopia builds on the liberal ideal of progressive development, with the future world of equality understood as the product of class struggle and capitalist crisis.

For Mannheim (1936), there is a close relationship between the mode of utopia, its historical time-sense and the class position of the group that produces it: the zeal of the millenarians, their desire for utopia in the here and now, was born of the 'mental structure peculiar to oppressed peasants, journeyman, an incipient Lumpenproletariat', whose absolute exclusion from medieval society led them to demand its immediate overturning (1936: 204); the liberal-humanitarian impulse to recuperate something from contemporary society stemmed from the middling, bourgeois status of its proponents; the declining classes in capitalist society, particularly the aristocracy, turned back to the past to reimagine a world where they were again dominant; and the socialist focus on the future is an expression of the status of the proletariat, which, as one of the rising classes of capitalist society, is able to harness the 'progressive social force' of historical development (1936: 218).

The point here is not to affirm the particulars of Mannheim's account of these modes of utopianism. Certainly, the attempt to map the relationship between social class, time-sense and utopian mode could easily become reductionist, limiting the various ways in which utopia can be expressed by peasants, capitalists, aristocrats and proletarians.

Nevertheless, *Ideologie und Utopie* offers some useful hints for thinking about the relationship between race, temporality and utopia. Two points should be stressed. First, the correspondence between utopia and the future should be augmented by a range of other temporal maps, with liberatory visions taking their cue from past, present and future. Simply put, utopia, like society more generally, is pluri-temporal (Adam, 1995). Second, utopian time maps are shaped by the experience of the social groups that produce them. Just as different standpoints generate distinctive knowledge of actually existing society, they also produce different ways of understanding its utopian other (Connell, 2007). With these two insights in hand, it is possible to turn to the distinctive coming together of past and future in Black visions of liberation.

Black Utopia: From Du Bois to Reparations

In this section, I analyse Black visions of liberation in the light of this account of utopian sociology and its temporality. The focus is on two African American utopias: Du Bois's 'The Comet' (1920) and the movement for reparations for slavery. It is not possible to trace the entire history of Black utopianism in this article, something which is done very ably elsewhere (Brown, 2021; Kelley, 2002; Sargent, 2020; Womack, 2013; Zamalin, 2019). While these histories often highlight the contributions of Du Bois and the reparations movement, they also include a wide range of other examples, such as: attempts to found African American towns, including the Exodusters of the 1870s and Civil Rights-leader Floyd McKissick's Soul City in the 1970s; literary utopias from Sutton E Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) to Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* (2019). and, Afrofuturism, the cultural movement mentioned above that emerged in the mid-20th century around figures like Sun Ra and George Clinton. Given this wide-ranging history, why focus on Du Bois and reparations? It should first be stressed that no claim is made regarding the *representativeness* of these two examples vis-a-vis the broader tradition of African American utopianism. That is, I do not argue that all Black utopianism converges with the visions discussed here. Instead, a more modest argument is made. I suggest that Du Bois and the reparations movement exemplify a *particular tendency* within this tradition. Following Joseph Winters's (2016) survey of the Black literary and aesthetic tradition, it is argued that the two examples highlighted elaborate a form of melancholic hope, in which the desire for a better world is indexed to the memory of racial violence. This tendency will be elaborated in greater detail as the section progresses.

Du Bois's Dialectic of Hope and Disappointment

The recent resurgence of sociological interest in Du Bois has focused on restating the importance of his work in the discipline (Back and Tate, 2015; Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020; Morris, 2015). Of particular importance here is Aldon Morris's *The Scholar Denied* (2015), a careful recuperation of Du Bois's pioneering empirical work at the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory. Morris stresses that Du Bois's contribution to the development of American sociology has been repressed in dominant accounts of its history. *The Scholar Denied* poses a question for us: is Du Bois also the *utopian denied*? There are reasons to think that Du Bois's work has much to contribute to utopian sociology.³ As

Du Bois scholars have stressed, a concern with visions of new and better worlds punctuates his corpus, something particularly evident in his works of fiction (Ahmad, 2009; Byerman, 1992; Zamalin, 2019). For instance, *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* (1911) contains a detailed description of a utopian community led by a Black woman from the South, while *Dark Princess* (1928) imagines a future world where all the racially oppressed peoples of the world form an anti-racist, anti-colonial alliance.

However, if there is one text where Du Bois's utopianism comes to the fore it is his short story 'The Comet'. The story, now regarded as a pioneering text in the Afrofuturist tradition (Womack, 2013), is centred on the arrival of a comet in New York. It follows a Black man named Jim, who has survived the arrival of the comet by a combination of chance and prejudice. After being sent deep into the vaults of a Wall Street bank to retrieve some records by his white boss, Jim is accidentally protected from the effects of the comet's deadly gas. After emerging from the vault, Jim confronts the destruction of New York, almost all of its inhabitants killed by the gasses of the comet. However, he eventually encounters another survivor: a rich, white woman called Julia. The two, after some initial suspicion, share a moment of recognition. Julia comes to see Jim as an equal: 'He was no longer a thing apart, a creature below, a strange outcast of another clime and blood, but her Brother Humanity incarnate' (Du Bois, 1920: 269). Jim also gains new understanding, his power and prowess growing as the structures of racism and prejudice fall away: 'The shackles seemed to rattle and fall from his soul. Up from the crass and crushing and cringing of his caste leaped the lone majesty of kings long dead' (Du Bois, 1920: 270).

Up to this point in the story, Du Bois's conception of utopia does not seem radically different from the futural emphasis often found in the sociological literature. 'The Comet' traces the movement from the degraded present, defined by the prejudice of New York in the early 20th century, to a world of freedom, the arrival of the deadly gasses clearing away the forces of racism and inaugurating a new state of equality. Indeed, Du Bois appears to base his tale on Wells's *In the Days of the Comet* (1906b), which also features the arrival of an extra-terrestrial object that fundamentally upturns social relations to produce a worldwide state of peace and unity. However, the temporality of Du Bois's tale is distinct; 'The Comet' is a subtle critique of the straightforward futurism of *In the Days of the Comet*. Significantly, in Du Bois's tale, the forces of the past are not left behind but come to disrupt and destroy the utopian future. At the end of the tale, it transpires that it is only New York that has been devastated; the rest of the USA remains intact. Julia's racist father suddenly emerges and proceeds to accuse Jim of rape, abuse him verbally and separate him from his daughter. With his intervention, the gaze between Jim and Julia 'faltered and fell', and everything returns to how it was before: the comet threatens but does not break the racist coordinates of American society (Du Bois, 1920: 270).

'The Comet' combines 'pessimism and hope', the initial moment of liberation quickly ruptured by the return of forces of racial violence (Zamalin, 2019: 61). Whereas Wells (like many utopian sociologists) understands the future in terms of decisive breaks and radical caesuras, a looping movement of time is presented in 'The Comet'. The tempering of the hopeful vision of the future by Du Bois should be understood as an attempt to reconcile the desire for liberation with the reversals and failures experienced by African

Americans, particularly in relation to the Civil War and Reconstruction in the 19th century. In Mannheim's terms, the time-sense of Black utopia is dependent on the social experience of those who articulate it. Du Bois (1903: 6), in *The Souls of Black Folk*, makes it clear that the great hopes aroused by emancipation were decisively crushed by the racial violence of the years that followed (including the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the development of the Jim Crow system of segregation): 'Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people.' The African American experience is defined by a dialectic of hope and disappointment, whereby 'divine' events (from civil wars to comets) that promise 'the end of all doubt' are accompanied by a feeling that the catastrophes of the past will never be eclipsed (Du Bois, 1903: 5). Racial violence has a hauntological presence; it cannot be completely forgotten (Baucom, 2005; Gordon, 2008).

This mediation between past and future in utopian visions is not unique to Du Bois. As noted above, Winters (2016) suggests that hopeful accounts of the future defined by racial equality in the African American tradition, including those advanced by Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, are very often accompanied by a pessimistic concern with the history of slavery and violence in the United States. This looping movement between future and past produces a distinctive form of 'melancholic hope', a hope that 'suggests that a better, less pernicious world depends partly on our heightened capacity to remember, contemplate, and be unsettled by race-inflected violence and suffering' (Winters, 2016: 16). In Tina Campt's (2017: 16–17) words, Black utopianism is 'not always loud and demanding' but 'frequently quiet and opportunistic, dogged and disruptive', looking for the fragile 'chinks and crevices' of liberation amid tragedy, defeat and suffering. One of the tasks of anti-racist utopianism is to bring together consciousness of the disastrous contours of the Black experience and visions of liberated worlds, with the movement from hope to disappointment and back again undercutting the embrace of ruptures and discontinuities characteristic of the modern temporal regime.

The Real Utopia of Reparations

In Raymond Ruyer's (1950: 9, emphasis in original, my translation) words, the literary utopia is a '*mental exercise in lateral possibilities*', working to discern 'the possibilities that it sees overflowing from the real'. Speculative visions of the type offered by Du Bois demonstrate the *full potentiality* of society, testing out different configurations of institutions, practices and mores. While the arrival of comets may not be likely, such imaginaries fulfil an important function: they guard against the reification of horizons of expectation and expand consciousness of the possible (Bauman, 1976; Levitas, 2013). Nevertheless, the exuberance of speculative accounts of other worlds might prompt a concern. If, following Wright's (2010: 6) real utopias method, what is needed are 'accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change', then the propositions of Du Bois fall short. While 'The Comet' may offer a productive counterpoint to the easy association of utopianism and futurity, it is not yet clear how its dialectic of hope and disappointment relates to 'plausible visions of radical alternatives' that can be achieved in the here and now (Wright, 2010: 8).

A question is thus raised: how can the distinctive temporality of the Black utopian tradition be translated into radical yet realisable demands? Turning to the movement for reparations for slavery and its aftermath is one way of responding to this question. Beginning with the demand for ‘40 acres and a mule’ in the aftermath of the Civil War, there is a long history of African Americans struggling for compensation for slavery, with everyone from the revolutionaries of the post-Civil Rights moment, like the Black Panther Party, to more recent movements, like Black Lives Matter, calling for reparations (Kelley, 2002; Táíwò, 2021). While proposals for reparations for slavery vary greatly in their specifics, the core components are as follows: the United States should formally recognise the harm caused by chattel slavery; the inequality faced by Black people since emancipation, from segregation to mass incarceration, is a legacy of slavery; and contemporary forms of racial inequality can only be overcome by programmes that specifically benefit the descendants of enslaved people (Brooks, 2004; Darity and Mullen, 2020; Henry, 2007).

There are good reasons to think of the demand for reparations as a real utopia. In contrast to ‘The Comet’, questions of viability and achievability are at the core of the reparations movement. As Wright (2010: 1) emphasises, a key component of real utopias is the examination of actually existing ‘cases of institutional innovations’ – such as participatory city budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and the Mondragon conglomerate of worker-owned cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain – ‘that embody in one way or another emancipatory alternatives to the dominant forms of social organization’. In a similar fashion, proponents of reparations have drawn attention to the small-scale experiments in reparatory justice that emerged in the aftermath of the American Civil War (Franke, 2019; Kelley, 2002). Emancipation left most African Americans with ‘nothing but freedom’; they were deprived of the resources needed to play a full role in American society (Brophy, 2006: 25). However, a few formerly enslaved people were, for a short time in the 1860s, provided with the land, materials and equipment required to found autonomous communities. They were compensated for their enslavement, however inadequately, via the redistribution of the property of former slaveholders. As Katherine Franke (2019: 11) emphasises in the case of the Port Royal and Davis Bend communities in Georgia, these reparations provided the basis for ‘utopian experiments in Black emancipation’, with African Americans developing communal modes of labouring and egalitarian forms of governance. Concerns about the workability of reparations are at least partially answered by the concrete experience of these communities. Like Wright’s examples, past reparations programmes suggest that redress for historical injustice and violence is a plausible proposition; it is something that has happened before, and there is no reason why it should not happen again.

Of course, reparations for the descendants of enslaved people cannot be simplistically based on these past examples. Since the vast majority of enslaved Black people and their descendants were not compensated in the 1860s, reparations is a partly speculative proposition. However, the lack of precedent is not an insurmountable barrier. As Wright (2010: 1) argues, there are purely ‘theoretical proposals’ that are still ‘attentive to realistic problems of institutional design and social feasibility’. Even if a particular experiment has not yet been tried, this does not mean that it is not a real utopia; a case can still be made for its viability and achievability. Proponents of reparations for slavery have developed detailed

proposals for how the descendants of enslaved people can be compensated (Brooks, 2004; Darity and Mullen, 2020; Henry, 2007). It is not for nothing that Boris Bittker, the author of the influential study *The Case for Black Reparations* (1973), was described as a ‘utopian technician’, his book demonstrating that ‘creative thought can devise a structure for reparations payments that takes into account the kinds of practical difficulties often described as unavoidable flaws’ (Tushnet, 1983: 210). Something similar could be said of James Forman, the author of the iconic ‘The Black Manifesto’ (1969). The manifesto demands that religious institutions in the United States invest five hundred million dollars in a range of African American economic, political and cultural endeavours. The churches that once helped to indoctrinate enslaved Black people into American society were now asked to help fund new organs of Black self-determination, including a publishing house, a television station, a university and a strike fund. Forman’s document puts forward a clear plan for reparations: it specifies an amount of money to be paid; identifies institutions complicit in slavery that should provide these funds; outlines how the money would be spent within the Black community; and highlights how this investment will ameliorate (though not extinguish) the material and psychological harm caused by slavery to African Americans.

However, while reparations qualifies as a realisable demand, there is a difference between Wright’s account of real utopias and the plans for reparations advanced by Bittker, Forman and others: temporality. Wright’s examples of real utopias – such as participatory budgeting and worker-owned cooperatives – lack a historical dimension; no attempt is made to respond to the catastrophes and tragedies of the past. By contrast, the demand for reparations takes up and concretises the distinctive temporality found in the Black utopian tradition, where hopes for the future are accompanied by the traumatic presence of the enslaved past. Reparations are caught between ‘a backward-looking assessment of harm’ and ‘a forward-looking conception of democratic reconstruction’ (Balfour, 2014: 53). The backward-looking moment of reparations involves a confrontation with the horrors of slavery. They would be an acknowledgement of the foundational role of enslaved labour and white supremacy in Western societies, both past and present, becoming ‘a way for black people to challenge and subvert the master narrative of white capitalist America and testify the truth of their own history’ (Marable, 2002: 251). The forward-looking moment of redress underscores its transformative power; the proper compensation of African Americans would involve the complete transformation of American society. As Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017: 202) comments, if it is true that ‘white supremacy is [. . .] a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it’, then undercutting structural racism through reparations involves the need to ‘imagine a new country’. The shuffling from past to future and back again necessitates the formulation of a utopia as radical as the catastrophes of history, the latter constantly piquing and provoking a movement to liberation. In Walter Benjamin’s (2003: 394) words, the desire for utopia is ‘nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren’, the positivity of the new world indexed to the negativity of the old.

Conclusion

Care should be taken not to overemphasise the distinctiveness of the temporal maps found in Black visions of other worlds. Many recent utopias contain moments of imperfection

and suffering (Moynan, 2014) and there are visions of racial progress that straightforwardly associate utopia and futurity (Seamster and Ray, 2018). That said, Black utopianism offers an important counterpoint to conceptualisations of utopia found in the sociological tradition. More specifically, following Julian Go's decolonial account of standpoint theory, by attending to the African American utopian perspective, it is possible to, on the one hand, 'provincialize categories' and, on the other, 'cultivate new theories or concepts of conventional objects' (Go, 2016: 173–174). Negatively speaking, Black utopianism encourages critical reflection on the assumptions that have traditionally governed attempts to imagine new worlds in the sociological literature. In particular, by attending to the Black tradition, the idea that utopias must be futural, and that consciousness of the past can only act as a drag on utopian consciousness, is revealed as a 'false universal' (Butler, 2000: 22). The association between utopia and futurity, common to liberatory projects from the emergence of modern time consciousness in the 18th century onwards, is questioned by the emphasis in the utopianism of Du Bois and the reparations movement on the past. Positively speaking, this critical analysis does not result in the abandonment of liberatory horizons. One message of the Black tradition is that any vision of the future that fails to attend to the sufferings of the past is not really a utopia, but a mirage that masks 'missed opportunities and [. . .] tragic disappointments' (Hartman, 2007: 46). An alternative conception of the temporality of utopia is thus advanced: the looping movement between past and future, which represents a means with which to do justice to the dialectic of hope and disappointment in the African American experience.

To bring this article to a close, we can return to Levitas's (1979: 31) statement that the task is 'to imagine utopia as possible'. The sociology of utopia, as I stressed in the introduction, is concerned with the question of possibility; it is about looking for the lines of alterity hidden within actually existing society and demonstrating that a new world can be realised. If, for utopian sociologists, the task is to analyse the present order for signs of novelty, then Black utopianism pushes sociologists to examine freedom dreams of the future for marks of the non-utopian past. From the perspective of the visions elaborated by Du Bois and the reparations movement, images of utopian societies that do not reflect on racial violence are unconvincing. In failing to speak to the circling movement between hope and disappointment in the African American historical experience, they are unable to motivate action in the present or act as a catalyst for social change. In other words, for another world to be possible, the straightforward futurism of the sociology of utopia needs to be revised. Or, as Rivers Solomon (2019: 100) notes in *The Deep*, which imagines a utopia formed by Black women thrown overboard during the times of the slave trade: 'A people needed a history. To be without one was death.' Whether it be 'The Comet's' warning about the recursive nature of racist violence or the emphasis in the reparations movement on the need to redress the catastrophes of slavery and its aftermath, visions of racial justice bring together the impulse to move forwards and the desire to glance backwards. Between past and future, new worlds become possible.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting here that nostalgia, like utopia, is also entwined with relations of racial and colonial power, an issue not considered by Bauman (see Ravela, 2020; Tinsley, 2020).
2. On the lack of attention given to Mannheim's understanding of utopia, see Kumar (2006) and Turner (2003).
3. Matt Dawson (2016) discusses Du Bois in *Social Theory for Alternative Societies*. However, Dawson does not address Du Bois's fictional work, such as 'The Comet', which is key to his utopianism.

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