

Ugly progress: W. E. B. Du Bois's sociology of the future

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Abstract

The work of W. E. B. Du Bois is a powerful but unjustly neglected resource for sociological enquiry. Powerful insofar that it cuts against the grain of sociology as it exists today, offering a distinctive set of tools that allow the social world to be approached, conceptualised and studied in new ways. Unjustly neglected insofar that the explicit and implicit racism of sociology has positioned Du Bois as a peripheral figure. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the task of recuperating Du Bois's hidden potency by considering his theory of social time. I argue that Du Bois's essay 'Of the Meaning of Progress' presents an incisive critique of the triumphalist conception of progress that was dominant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the diffuse desire for a better future common in sociology today. Du Bois rejects the idea that history moves in a necessary and ameliorative fashion towards an ever better world. Instead, drawing on the black experience of slavery and racial violence, Du Bois proposes a notion of ugly progress: a looping conception of time that involves shuffling between the disappointments of the past and utopian hopes for the future. To conclude, I suggest the ugly conception of progress offers a fresh perspective on how marginalised figures from the past, such as Du Bois himself, should be positioned within the discipline of sociology.

Keywords

Du Bois, progress, race, social theory, temporality

Introduction: Reading Du Bois today

The aim of this article is, at first glance, simple: to explore the critical potentialities of the theory of social time advanced by the African-American thinker, social researcher and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) in his iconic *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). This might seem like a familiar, even routine, task in the realm of social theory, involving the analysis of previous interpretations of Du Bois's work, the careful reading of key texts, and a consideration of the critical value of his work. There is, however, an

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added complication when reading Du Bois today: the fact that his work has long been marginalised within the discipline of sociology. As the titles of recent works on Du Bois's relationship to sociology by Reiland Rabaka (2010) and Aldon Morris (2015) suggest, *Against Epistemic Apartheid* and *The Scholar Denied* respectively, there has long been a neglect of Du Bois's powerful theoretical writings and pioneering empirical studies in sociology. Highlighting the marginal position of Du Bois in the discipline is nothing new. For example, Dan S. Green and Edwin D. Driver, in the 1970s, offered an account of Du Bois's 'negation by the white sociological fraternity' (1976, p. 319). Nevertheless, the restatement of this negation in recent years by scholars such as Rabaka and Morris suggests that the problem remains. Bluntly put, the lack of interest in Du Bois is symptomatic of the implicit and explicit racism of sociology, which results in the peripheralisation of the voices of black sociologists, positioning their work as, at best, only relevant for the subfield of the sociology of race and, at worst, of no value whatsoever (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 1997; Krause, 2016).

The politics of interpretation is acutely felt when working on Du Bois. Approaching Du Bois involves not simply the act of reading, understanding and communicating but also recuperating, rediscovering and redeeming. As Morris notes, there is a need to return to Du Bois's corpus with the aim of recovering those elements that 'challenge existing paradigms, disrupt dominant narratives and illuminate new truths' (2017, p. 4). When reading Du Bois today, two things should be accomplished: first, the foregrounding of a perspective that has been wrongfully neglected within sociology and, second, the fundamental reconstruction of the discipline in the light of this recovered perspective (Back and Tate, 2015; Lemert, 2002; Meer, 2019). In reading Du Bois, a shuttling movement is needed, with the interpreter's gaze alternating between the distinctive logics of Du Bois's work and the dominant coordinates of sociology such that, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) terms, the always-already premature prejudices of the latter are reformed and transfigured in their confrontation with the former. The task, then, is to approach figures such as Du Bois as 'independent theorists reformulating, creating, and in many cases rejecting the thinking of Europe altogether' (Curry, 2014, p. 412).

I bring this interpretive disposition to my study of Du Bois's work on social time, demonstrating that the critical potentialities of Du Bois's account of progress are best understood by reading him against the sociological grain. More specifically, from Du Bois, it is possible to construct an understanding of progress that is defined by a dialectic of hope and disappointment, with the desire for a better world indelibly marked by the experience of past failures. To demonstrate this, I begin by considering the place of progress within sociology, making a distinction between the universal, necessary and scientific notions of historical time that dominated sociological thinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the more diffuse desire for a better world that is common in the discipline today. I then turn to a detailed reading of the essay 'Of the Meaning of Progress', included in *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which Du Bois elaborates a distinctive understanding of social time via a narrative of his experience as a teacher in a small rural village in Tennessee. Du Bois, in his observations on a ruined schoolhouse in the village, develops a notion of what he calls ugly progress: a looping conception of time that involves shuffling between the disappointments of the past and hopes for the future, with each formed in confrontation with the other. In the final section, I highlight the

implications of this reading. Drawing on standpoint theory, I suggest that 'Of the Meaning of Progress' both provincialises the desire for a better world, demonstrating its distinctive meaning in the African-American context, and reconstructs the old concept of progress, suggesting that a forward-looking hope for the future must be accompanied by a backward-looking glance to the catastrophes of the past. On this basis, I turn back to the sociological canon, arguing that Du Bois's understanding of the ugliness of progress offers a fresh perspective on how marginalised figures from the past, such as Du Bois himself, should be positioned within sociology. In this way, this article makes two key contributions: first, returning to Du Bois to gesture towards the possibility of a new way of thinking about social time and, second, utilising Du Bois's understanding of temporality to rethink the way in which unjustly excluded thinkers from sociology's history are approached.

Progress and its aftermath

Progress, as a concept, stands at the basis of many of the most influential social theoretical accounts of the world. Foundational social theorists – from Comte to Marx, Durkheim to Weber – were committed to some version of the claim that the passage of time is ameliorative (Kumar, 1991; Nisbet, 1994). The movement of history is synonymous with the incremental achievement of desired normative values. Whatever the content of this historical shift – whether from the metaphysical to the positive stage (Comte), capitalism to communism (Marx), mechanical to organic solidarity (Durkheim) or traditional to legal-rational authority (Weber) – society is directed towards the fulfilment of certain definite ethical requirements (Kumar, 1991). Broadly speaking, these accounts of progress are defined by three features. First, the subject of progress is universal. Humanity is understood to develop according to a common set of stages. As such, some groups can be positioned as more advanced than others according to a generic schema of historical progression (Bhambra, 2007). Second, progress is understood as necessary and linear, such that the movement of societies through the stages posited 'cannot be stopped or deflected' (Sztompka, 1994, p. 28). Progress names the belief that improvement in history is 'general and constant, while every regression, decline, or decay occurs only partially or temporarily' (Koselleck, 2002, p. 227). Finally, epistemologically speaking, progress implies that the laws of history can be known, such that the concept is associated with 'scientific prediction, based on the reading of history, and the operation of laws of social development' (Pollard, 1968, p. 9).

Now, clearly, the strong notion of progress, associated with these claims to universality, necessity and scientific knowledge, that dominated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has been questioned. The catastrophes of the period between the beginning of the First World War in 1914 and the genocide of the Jews and the detonation of the nuclear bomb in the 1940s prompted criticisms of triumphalist notions of historical advance (Aronson, 1996). Furthermore, over the course of the twentieth century, it became clear that progress is deeply imbricated with colonial relations of domination, such that narratives of advancement and backwardness contribute to the entrenchment of global inequality and imperial violence (Escobar, 1995). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that these developments resulted in the end of progress. Progress may be a 'dead

subject', insofar that it lacks theoretical credence and has few enthusiastic exponents, but we still live in its shadow (Nisbet, 1994, p. ix). While few contemporary sociologists would commit to the strong conception of progress that was dominant at the origins of the discipline, many desire, either implicitly or explicitly, the realisation of a social world better than the present (Dawson, 2016). Michael Burawoy's (2005) public sociology and Erik Olin Wright's (2010) real utopias are two particularly high profile, sustained examples of this progressive impulse. The desire for a sociology committed to social justice should, of course, be welcomed. At the same time, the categories through which we think about the future are not neutral. For instance, Amy Allen (2016) has emphasised that the impulse towards a better future in the work of prominent critical theorists Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth is tied up with Eurocentric assumptions of progressive development. In a similar fashion, Viktor Ray and his colleagues have explored the degree to which the sociology of race is reliant on logics of progress predicated on the ideal of whiteness (Ray et al., 2017; Seamster & Ray, 2018). As these two quite diverse examples suggest, sociology is still grappling with the problem of the future.

I argue that Du Bois's work offers resources for thinking about both the strong concept of progress that dominated in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, on the one hand, and the more diffuse desire for a better world that is common today, on the other. The following two sections of the article are, broadly speaking, divided between these two approaches to the future. In the next section, I approach 'Of the Meaning of Progress' as a critique of the triumphalist notion of progress that was dominant at the moment when Du Bois was writing. The final section, by contrast, is concerned with extrapolating a Du Boisian perspective on the concern with social hope in sociology today. There is something in Du Bois's reflections on progress that permits us, however tentatively, to bring his insights to bear on contemporary questions that he himself could not have anticipated. The article thus moves from the careful interpretative work of reconstructing Du Bois's theorisation of social time in the context of the dominant intellectual tendencies of the nineteenth century to a reflection on the value of a Du Boisian perspective for thinking about the desire for a better world that motivates sociologists in the twenty-first century. Du Bois's argument about the constitution of social time in his own historical moment thus has relevance for us today.

Reading the ruins of progress

In some ways, Du Bois's work might not seem to provide an especially propitious resource for rethinking progress. The golden age of progress in the nineteenth century, when the concept enjoyed a dominant position within European and North American culture, left its mark on Du Bois's work. Indeed, some scholars have associated Du Bois with the strong narratives of progress of classical social theory, suggesting that he 'often relied on metaphors implying progress as measured in relation to whiteness' (Ray et al., 2017, p. 148; see also Connell, 1997; Gaines, 1996). However, other accounts emphasise Du Bois's distance, if not complete estrangement, from universal, necessary and scientific notions of historical advance. Paul Gilroy's remark that Du Bois meditates 'on the meanings which the concept of Progress can have when approached from the standpoint of the slave' is instructive here (1993, p. 113). Du Bois, as this suggests, brings

something distinctive to his conceptualisation of social time, with the black experience of slavery and its aftermath resulting in an ambivalent posture towards triumphalist narratives of development. Gilroy's concern with Du Bois's notion of progress has been taken up by Charles Lemert (2002) and Joseph R. Winters (2016), who both stress the entwining of Du Bois's understanding of historical advance with questions of loss, melancholia and sorrow.

While not the only temporal tendency in Du Bois's work – there are certainly moments when the strong concept of progress comes to the fore – the act of bringing together progress and catastrophe is registered at a number of moments in his corpus. Du Bois's (1920) short story 'The Comet' is a good example. The tale focuses on the experiences of a black man called Jim in the aftermath of a comet that has devastated New York. Jim encounters the only other survivor in the city, a white woman, and the two share a moment of recognition, confronting one another as equals. This moment of hope is, however, short-lived. The comet has left the rest of the country unscathed, resulting in the destruction of the tentative union between the black man and the white woman by her racist father. A similar movement from hope to disappointment can be observed in Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*. In the post-Civil War moment, Du Bois asserts, there was a possibility for an alliance between newly emancipated black people and poor whites, the two groups working together to forge an 'abolition-democracy based on freedom, intelligence and power for all men' (1935, p. 182). The tragedy of Reconstruction, as in 'The Comet', was the sundering of this coming together of black and white. The alliance of 'Big Business and slave barons' – Northern capitalists and Southern landowners – succeeded in denying black people civil and political rights *and* denying the labouring class (both black and white) economic equality (Du Bois, 1935, p. 237). By offering the poor whites the 'psychological wage' of privilege over black people in lieu of a just economic system for all, both racism and capitalism were secured (Du Bois, 1935, p. 700). Du Bois's non-triumphalist conception of history, in which every hope for betterment is accompanied by an acute awareness of the potential for violent failure, is encapsulated in his autobiographical reflection in *Dusk of Dawn* that: 'As I looked out into my racial world the whole thing verged on tragedy. My "way was cloudy" and the approach to its high goals by no means straight and clear' (2007, p. 66).

Du Bois's reference to the cloudiness that defines the African-American experience has an intertextual significance. It is a reference to the black spiritual 'My Way's Cloudy', a bar from which provides the musical epigraph to Du Bois's essay 'Of the Meaning of Progress'. This essay, as I aim to demonstrate here, provides the key to the shuttling movement between hope and disappointment gestured towards in the texts discussed above. 'Of the Meaning of Progress', positioned at the heart of *The Souls of Black Folk*, draws forth the implicit understanding of social time contained in Du Bois's later accounts of the speculative future ('The Comet'), the defeat of abolition-democracy (*Black Reconstruction*) and his own life (*Dusk of Dawn*), clarifying the terms of the Du Boisian critique of the dominant conception of progress and indicating an alternative understanding of temporality predicated on the figures of ruination and ugliness. Yet, 'Of the Meaning of Progress', as befitting a text that begins with 'My Way's Cloudy', is far from a straightforward attempt to conceptualise progress. The essay takes the form of an autobiographical reflection by Du Bois on his time teaching at a small village school in

the hills of Tennessee. Du Bois begins on a note of hopefulness, with the talent of his pupils stressed. Despite the poverty of the village, and the ramshackle nature of its schoolhouse, the students' 'weak wings beat against their barriers', striving to fulfil the potential that appears in flashes on the wooden benches of the schoolhouse (Du Bois, 1903, p. 68). In particular, a student called Josie is a beacon of this sense of promise: 'She had about her a certain fineness, the shadow of an unconscious moral heroism that would willingly give all of life to make life broader, deeper and fuller for her and hers' (Du Bois, 1903, p. 62).

All of this has changed, however, when Du Bois revisits the village a decade later. The fragile feeling of possibility has been almost entirely extinguished by the 'heap of trouble' experienced since Du Bois's departure, with his former pupils facing imprisonment, indebtedness and death (1903, p. 69). The demise of Josie, worn down by poverty until 'the vision of schooldays all fled', symbolises the disappointment of the previous hope for a broader, deeper and fuller life (Du Bois, 1903, p. 70). Most poignantly, the schoolhouse that provided an incubator for the talent of the village's children has been replaced:

My log schoolhouse was gone. In its place stood Progress; and Progress, I understand, is necessarily ugly. The crazy foundation stones still marked the former site of my poor little cabin, and not far away, on six weary boulders, perched a jaunty board house, perhaps twenty by thirty feet, with three windows and a door that locked. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 70)

This passage, which includes the first explicit mention of progress in the essay, is the linchpin of Du Bois's account of temporality in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Yet, its meaning, even within the context of Du Bois's broader account of his time in Tennessee, is enigmatic. More specifically, three questions can be posed: What is it about the ruins of the schoolhouse that prompts this reflection on progress? Why does Du Bois's assessment of progress take an aesthetic form? And, finally, why does the appearance of a new schoolhouse evoke a negative, rather than positive, reaction in Du Bois?

These questions will guide my reading of Du Bois's essay for the remainder of this section. For the moment, some preliminary interpretative questions should be posed: Is there a tension between my claim that 'Of the Meaning of Progress' contains a *theory* of social time and the *narrative* form of this text? Does reading this essay for an abstract set of theoretical statements risk interpretive violence? To consider this issue, we can turn to Barbara Christian's famous statement that black social thought 'is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking' (1987, p. 52). The narrative form of Du Bois's account of progress should not, therefore, be taken to automatically mean that his essay is non-theoretical. Instead, I begin with the assumption that Du Bois is making an argument about social time, even if this is in a form that is unfamiliar to dominant sociology. At the same time, this does not mean that we can simply abstract the theory from the narrative; the latter is an integral aspect of the former. The interpretive task, then, is to do justice to *both* the theoretical and narrative moments of Du Bois's essay; the theoretical claims regarding progress can only be understood through the account of life in a small Tennessee village, and vice versa.

Turning to 'Of the Meaning of Progress', it is first worth placing Du Bois's essay in the broader context of *The Souls of Black Folk*. The study as a whole has a strong temporal undercurrent. Robert Gooding-Williams's reading brings Du Bois's temporal understanding to the fore with his suggestion that *The Souls of Black Folk* is fundamentally concerned with the 'politics of expressive self-realization' (2009, p. 4). That is to say, for Du Bois, 'Negro blood has a message for the world' that, due to slavery and racial violence, has only been partially and inchoately expressed (1903, p. 4). The self-development of black people has been truncated by the catastrophic processes of American history such that their distinctive power remains latent. The struggle of black folk is not purely negative. It is not solely predicated on an opposition to racial prejudice but also on an autonomous inner ethos that progressively reveals itself as each barrier erected by slavery (and its legacies) is overcome. Progress consists in the self-realisation of black folk: 'the full, complete Negro message of the whole Negro race has not as yet been given to the world' (Du Bois, 2015, p. 56). Already we see that the universalism of the strong narrative of progress, its claim that all peoples share a generic schema of development, is questioned in Du Bois's account; the experience of slavery and racial violence in the United States means that there is something particular that black folk offer to the world.

The entwinement of black self-realisation and progress is evident in Du Bois's reflections on his time teaching in rural Tennessee. The talent of his pupils, as exemplified by Josie, is stressed, with the potential power of the black folk of the village evident in embryonic form. Yet, the structural processes of racial prejudice in America – namely, the poverty of the black village – stymie this process of development; the promise of Josie and her fellow pupils is not allowed to come to full fruition. A concern, however, can be raised here. At first glance, Du Bois's commitment to expressive self-realisation might seem similar to many of the standard sociological accounts of progress discussed above. Du Bois takes a schema of historical development and simply extends it to the particular experience of black folk in the United States. Each people has its own essence, a germ that is progressively unfolded over the course of its existence, with progress consisting in the realisation of this inner identity and its full expression. It seems that Du Bois operates with a sense of *anamnesis*, or the idea that the future is a form of remembering involving the 'return of an already completed First Thing which has been lost or relinquished' (Bloch, 1985, p. 203). The task for black folk, in this fashion, is fundamentally the same as all other peoples: to become what they are. In fact, Du Bois might be seen to be complicit in an act of what anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls the 'denial of coevalness', or the idea that a marginalised group lags behind a dominant group; black people need to catch up with white people (2014, p. 31).

However, Du Bois aims to demonstrate something more than the claim that black people should be included within the story of progress. Part of the message of the black folk for the world is an alternative way of comprehending historical time in which hope for the future is accompanied by disappointment. Contra the strong notion of progress, there is no linear, necessary path to improvement. To understand this, we can return to Du Bois's image of the ruined schoolhouse in 'Of the Meaning of Progress', which subtly reworks the conventional notion of expressive self-realisation gestured towards in the earlier chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk*. In an instructive remark, Winters notes that

the ruined schoolhouse reminds the reader 'of those fractured dimensions of the social world, that are not easily assimilated, that cannot be easily reconciled by narratives of progress' (2016, p. 62). In other words, the ruined schoolhouse attests to the fact that the future cannot be simply positioned as the realm of betterment. In anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's (2008) terms, a *ruin*, a school building that has ceased to fulfil its original function, becomes a metaphor for *ruination*, the processes that curtail the dreams of black folk. The people of the village live in the shadow of the failure of the hopes incubated in the schoolhouse. As indicated in the discussion of *Black Reconstruction*, the experience of 'deep disappointment' is central to African-American history, with Du Bois emphasising that hopes for freedom during the times of Civil War and Reconstruction, piqued by the formal end of slavery, were quashed by the racial violence and state-sanctioned prejudice that followed (1903, p. 6). The log schoolhouse becomes a moment in a broader dialectic of hope and disappointment, encapsulating the black experience of the future in the post-Middle Passage world.

Yet, as this gesture towards a dialectic suggests, ruins do not only prompt a sense of loss and ending. Instead, for Du Bois, there is a strange sense of hopefulness that emerges from the observation of the ruined schoolhouse. Here, it should be stressed that disappointment itself is an ambiguous feeling. Feelings of despair and disillusionment suggest finality: a hope that one once had is now impossible, as in despair, or undesirable, as in disillusionment. By contrast, disappointment is open-ended. The original hope has not been realised, but it still remains something that was worth hoping for. In viewing the schoolhouse, a sense of missed opportunities is evoked. Andreas Huyssen instructively notes: 'We are nostalgic for the ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future' (2006, p. 8). Ruins represent the residue of past hopes that retain a ghostly presence in the contemporary world. The schoolhouse, even if it only survives in its crazy foundation stones, is a placeholder for the presence of past hopes in the present; the spectre of Josie's desire for a fuller life remains in the Tennessee village even after her death. What is painful in her death, then, as Emmanuel Levinas (2000) argues more generally, is not her absence as such, but the sense of unfinished business, that there is still work to do to realise the old dreams that were incubated in the log schoolhouse.

On this basis, we can turn to Du Bois's use of aesthetic terms in his account of social time and, in particular, his understanding of progress as 'necessarily ugly' (1903, p. 70). At first glance, this appears to be a negative assessment of the concept of progress, evoking the sense of loss that structures Du Bois's observations of the ruined schoolhouse and his understanding of the African-American experience more generally. However, for Du Bois, ugliness is an ambivalent aesthetic judgement. This becomes particularly clear in his later essay 'Of Beauty and Death', included in the collection *Darkwater*, where he states: 'Ugliness to me is eternal, not in the essence but in its incompleteness; but its eternity does not daunt me, for its eternal unfulfillment is a cause of joy' (1920, p. 247). The incompleteness of ugliness evokes a feeling of joy, for Du Bois, insofar that it portends the possibility of change and development. By contrast, beauty represents a kind of stillness, to the extent that Du Bois suggests that its 'end is Death – the sweet silence of perfection, the calm and balance of utter music' (1920, p. 247). The ruin of the schoolhouse can be called ugly insofar that there is something unfinished about it; the dreams it contained have been

disappointed, the inner drive for black self-realisation truncated. This evokes a feeling of joy, however, insofar that there is still something to achieve; there are unexplored and unfulfilled possibilities in the schoolhouse that can be taken up again.

Du Bois's aesthetic language works to implicitly critique whiteness, suggesting that the ugliness of the black world, symbolised by the ruined schoolhouse, is a valuable quality: 'Neither Roman nor Arab, Greek nor Egyptian, Persian nor Mongol ever took himself and his own perfectness with such disconcerting seriousness as the modern white man' (1920, p. 35). The self-confessed perfection of whiteness means that it contains within it no new developments; the white world represents a closed circle that, convinced of its own beauty, has nothing to pique it to go beyond itself. By contrast, the black eye for ruins – with their ugly, incomplete appearance – provides an impetus for change. The awareness of the incompleteness and imperfectness of the world is positively evaluated by Du Bois, with a sensibility for ugliness being one of the conditions of progress. Progress is thus transfigured in its confrontation with the contours of the black experience in the United States. A better world is not simply sitting on the horizon, waiting to be realised, and instead progress becomes a process of sifting through the residues of African-American hopes to impel renewed movement forward. The hope for betterment is no longer a triumphant march forward, but a more hesitant shuffle between the disasters of the past and hopes for the future. To borrow Ernst Bloch's term, the 'undischarged past' becomes the key to progress, providing a set of resources for a hopeful disposition to the future predicated on the tragedies of the African-American experience (1991, p. 308).

There is, however, something more to Du Bois's account of progress than an emphasis on the experience of disappointment and the phenomenon of ugliness. The image of the second schoolhouse, the 'jaunty board house' that sits a short distance from Du Bois's ruined log schoolhouse, is of particular importance here (1903, p. 70). Du Bois is clear that the new schoolhouse represents, in some respects, an improvement on his own: the blackboard is bigger, there is more furniture, and it hosts regular sessions of school. However, Du Bois is unable to fully embrace the change that has occurred: 'As I sat by the spring and looked on the Old and the New I felt glad, very glad, and yet-' (1903, p. 71). One way to think about Du Bois's equivocal reaction to the new schoolhouse is in terms of his famous critique in *The Souls of Black Folk* of Booker T. Washington's plan for African-American social advance. Washington, in his hugely influential memoir-cum-manifesto *Up From Slavery* (1901), argued that the first step to black progress is economic. Before claiming political and civil rights, it was contended, African-Americans must establish themselves as business owners and reliable labourers. Du Bois characterised Washington's programme as a 'gospel of Work and Money', which entirely sidelined 'the higher aims in life', or the cultivation of black genius of the type fleetingly embodied by Josie (1903, p. 50). The economic bent of Washington's philosophy has a certain affinity with the new schoolhouse: both are predicated on quantitative rather than qualitative changes in African-American life. Washington's demand that black people work more and make more money is echoed in the schoolhouse hosting more lessons, housing a bigger blackboard and containing more furniture.

The concern, then, for Du Bois, is that the new schoolhouse is missing the higher aims of life, or the attempt to realise the inner ethos of the African-American people through a transfiguring ideal. Hence, Du Bois's affection for the ruins of the old schoolhouse, where the

promise of Josie was cultivated, acts as a critique of the new: the desire *for more* risks becoming a desire *for more of the same*. Without a fundamental shift in the African-American condition, the quantitative advances imagined by Washington come up against certain hard limits. All of this raises a question: What are the so-called higher aims that provide direction for progressive development? Importantly, in the essay on progress, Du Bois holds back from offering a positive account of what progress would consist in, with the essay ending on an enigmatic, questioning note: 'How shall man measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies? How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat?' (1903, p. 73). With this second question, we again see Du Bois's contrast between quantitative and qualitative modes of assessing progress, with the lack of correspondence between wheat and sorrow suggesting that economic measures are insufficient in themselves. However, the first question suggests that Du Bois rejects the idea that we can have determinate, scientific knowledge of progressive developments. Du Bois's critique of Washington's economic doctrine is partly predicated on a rejection of the possibility of positively knowing the development of the black folk as a whole. After the death of Josie, we cannot understand what progress would consist in. Returning to the question of *anamnesis*, there is not yet an essence of the black folk on Du Bois's understanding: the black message for the world is something that exists only in the future, the 'highest good is itself this goal which is not yet formed' (Bloch, 1985, p. 1324). The thoroughgoing plans for black advance of the type elaborated by Washington are premature; he posits knowledge of the future that cannot yet be attained in the present. What emerges is an apophatic notion of progress, in which it is possible to know *what progress is not* without having the criteria to assess *what progress is*. An abandoned schoolhouse in a black village, and the death of its most talented pupil, is defiantly not an instance of progress. However, all the time that individuals such as Josie are unable to grow up, a full and complete account of progress is impossible: all we have are the inklings and glimpses that can be discerned in the ruins.

Thinking progress otherwise

Du Bois's 'Of the Meaning of Progress', in this way, advances an understanding of the desire for a better world in terms of disappointment, ruination and ugliness. The future of the black folk cannot be separated from their past and this past, in turn, cannot be simplistically elided with the experience of whiteness: whereas the former is shaped by the negative, the latter is one of the positive alone. We might, however, pose a question at this point: What is the effect of Du Bois's hesitant shuffle between the disasters of the past and hopes for the future? One of the central arguments for revisiting Du Bois, as suggested in the introduction, is that his work has the potential to reform sociology for the better, something succinctly captured by Aldon Morris in his counterfactual claim that 'if Du Bois's scholarship had been placed at the center of the founding of the discipline a century ago, it would have provided both theoretical and methodological direction to this new intellectual endeavor' (2015, p. xvii). The hope here, as with standpoint theory developed in feminist and postcolonial contexts, is that the recovery of the perspective of subordinated and subjugated peoples will produce a new, critical understanding of the social world (Connell, 2007; Harding, 2008). The question, then, is: How does Du Bois's account of progress enrich sociological knowledge today?

Drawing on Julian Go's (2016) discussion of the value of the perspective of the subaltern, the Du Boisian understanding developed here has two key contributions to make: first, provincialising categories and, second, rethinking old concepts. To think about provincialisation, we can return to the interventions of Burawoy (2005) and Wright (2010), with their concepts of public sociology and real utopias respectively. The claim here is that hope is an important element of the sociological endeavour; the theoretical work and empirical research of the discipline can change the world for the better. The Du Boisian perspective, however, demonstrates the limits of this form of hopefulness in terms of the African-American experience. The invocation of hope by figures such as Burawoy and Wright does not have the same meaning for everybody; there is something particular about this call. In the light of the catastrophe of slavery and racial violence in the United States, demands for hope that fail to attend to disappointment are hollow. Positing the need for utopian desire without a proper confrontation with the ruins of black experience, from the collapsed schoolhouse in the rural village to the betrayals of the post-Civil War era, is unconvincing from the Du Boisian perspective. Hope for the future is indexed to a profound sense of the failures of the past (see Winters, 2016). The impulse towards a better world is not rejected but it is altered from within, with the African-American experience demonstrating the limits of a hope that is focused only on the future.

The negative task of provincialisation clears the way for the positive work of rethinking the concepts of progress and hope. Du Bois's essay encourages a process of thinking progress otherwise, augmenting our understanding of the possible meanings of social hope. Progress and hope, whatever their differences, are characteristically guided by the image of a fulfilled world that stands in the future. By contrast, the Du Boisian position, in associating progress with ruination and ugliness, constantly calls us backward. We are presented with a series of images – the ruined schoolhouse, the new schoolhouse, the fate of Josie – that both, on the one hand, remind us of the catastrophes of the African-American experience and, on the other, give us a glimpse of black possibility, fragments of how the future could have been. In this way, the Du Boisian meditation on how progress appears from the perspective of the slave recalls Walter Benjamin's famous statement that: 'This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren' (2003, p. 394).¹ The figure of the enslaved ancestors, who are, of course, not merely rhetorical for Du Bois, reroutes progress through the past, forcing attention to the entanglement of hope and disappointment. Ugly or ruinous progress thus comes to name the process of attending to the incompleteness of the black experience, with the aim of both critiquing the forces of ruination that afflict black lives and discerning speculative lines of development that provide a clue, however tentative, to future development.

This reading of Du Bois might be seen to exemplify the value of standpoint epistemology: through the careful interpretation of a marginalised figure from a subjugated group (Du Bois in this case) a new perspective (termed Du Boisian) on old sociological concepts (progress and hope) can be gained. Du Bois would emerge, in Patricia Hill Collins's terms, as an 'outsider within', whose lived experience at the margins produces a perspective that can reform the mainstream (1986, p. 14). It is interesting, however, that Collins (2016) herself, in a response to Morris's *The Scholar Denied*, complicates our understanding of Du Bois's legacy. Collins questions Morris's assumption that the

incorporation of Du Bois into mainstream American sociology would be a positive development. Du Bois, on Collins's account, found freedom at the edges of official academia, with the power of his work indexed to his relative independence from the coordinates of dominant sociology. The denial of Du Bois was the condition of possibility for his thought, such that his marginality, in bell hooks's propitiously utopian phrasing, produced a 'radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (1990, p. 150). There is, in this sense, a tension between the outsider status of Du Bois and the desire to integrate him into sociology. The demand that we provincialise and rethink sociology from a Du Boisian perspective risks dulling Du Bois's power, which is dependent precisely on his peripheral position.

We are presented with two opposing modes of historical emplotment: first, a romantic one, in which the inclusion of Du Bois results in a discipline more attuned to the distinctive critical power of the black experience in America and, second, a tragic one, in which the integration of Du Bois's work undermines precisely these critical qualities (see Scott, 2004). Perhaps, however, on the basis of the analysis of Du Bois's conceptualisation of temporality discussed above, an alternative understanding of Du Bois's power can be elaborated. By adopting a *Du Boisian perspective on Du Bois*, new possibilities open up. One way to think about this is to consider how Du Bois would appear if we take him, and his corpus of work, as a ruin. As we have seen, the ruined schoolhouse in 'Of the Meaning of Progress' is the key image through which Du Bois elaborates his understanding of temporality, with the ugliness of this ruin denoting its unfinished nature, pointing both to the processes of violence that have resulted in its ruination and the utopian potentialities that reside within it. To position Du Bois himself as a ruin encourages a similarly double reading, charting a path between the romantic perspective of Morris and the tragic perspective of Collins. On the one hand, reading Du Bois as a ruin piques the sociological imagination, pushing it beyond the congealed form that it has taken over the last century and opening up hidden potentialities, working to provincialise and rethink concepts in the way discussed above. On the other hand, we are conscious that these potentialities were unrealised in the moment when they were first articulated and, furthermore, that they may never be realised.

We are thus left with an *unfinished standpoint*, a perspective that is indelibly divided between hope and disappointment, wholeness and ruination, beauty and ugliness. We can use Du Boisian insights to rework sociological concepts but this process cannot be completed. There is something infinite and indefinite about the movement between Du Bois and sociology, such that the aim of transforming the latter is both enabled and curtailed by the ruinous contours of the former's life. It is enabled insofar that Du Bois, precisely because of his marginality, offers us glimpses of an alternative sociology that was never realised in his lifetime, but curtailed insofar that we cannot definitely know what a complete Du Boisian perspective would look like. Here, we can return to the apophatic epistemology that Du Bois gestures towards in 'Of the Meaning of Progress'. Just as we cannot say what Josie would have become had she been allowed to live, we cannot know what a Du Boisian sociology would be. All we have are the fragments of a sociology to come; the glimpses of another world that may pique a movement beyond the contours of the discipline as currently constituted but not the formation of a harmonious whole. The process of learning from Du Bois lacks a definite end, such that his work stimulates a process of transformation that perpetually falls short of completion.

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Note

1. As my references to Benjamin, Bloch and Levinas in this article suggest, there is an affinity between the Du Boisian perspective on progress and models of temporality developed by European Jewish intellectuals in the twentieth century. A number of scholars have compared Du Bois and Benjamin, noting that the African-American experience of slavery and the Jewish experience of persecution have produced a similar set of theoretical concerns (Weheliye, 2005; Winters, 2016).

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