

Title:

Speculative Fiction Writing in Classical Sociology

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Short Abstract

A largely overlooked aspect of early social science is its engagement with fiction as a mode of theorizing social processes and transformation. This paper examines how the speculative fiction of H. G. Wells, Gabriel Tarde, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W. E. B. Du Bois contributed to foundational debates on the nature of sociology, offering insights into the mutually-productive relationship between sociology and literature. Wells, a central figure in early science fiction, actively participated in British sociological debates, arguing that sociology should focus on “creating Utopias” rather than emulating the physical sciences. His widely read speculative works were grounded in social research and functioned as a form of social scientific inquiry. Tarde’s *Fragment d’histoire future* (1896), published in a sociological journal and introduced by Wells in its English edition, envisioned a future of intensified social relations as a way of exploring the implications of his sociological theory. Gilman, through her feminist utopian trilogy (*Moving the Mountain*, *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland*), theorized conditions for gender and labor equality, engaging in explicit dialogue with Wells and American sociologists. Du Bois, particularly in his novels and short stories like “The Comet” (1920), explored Afrofuturism and the role of literature in reconstructing historical experience and envisioning alternative futures. Each of these explicitly reflected on the relationship between their literary efforts and their social theorizing and research. Rather than treating literature as mere falsehood or invention, they saw it as a mode of social knowledge, offering plausible accounts of social transformation. This paper situates their work within recently renewed debates in sociology about the relevance of speculative literature and its relevance for studying and shaping possible futures.

Extended Abstract

Although one thinks of classic works such as More’s *Utopia*, Plato’s *Republic*, or Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, or of attempts at Owenite or religious planned communities, there is a more proximate and overlooked attempt to theorize utopian social change in the founding generation of sociology, itself. This paper traces those disputes regarding the sociological utopias of H. G. Wells, Gabriel Tarde, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W. E. B. Du Bois as a way of identifying questions for contemporary theoretical debate on the sociological study of the future and of radical social transformation.

H. G. Wells, remembered primarily for his influential early science fiction works, participated in the Sociological Society meetings in London, and gave a controversial paper in 1907 arguing that sociology should eschew its pretensions to be like the positivist physical sciences and should instead endeavor to “create Utopias.” Wells’ argument in his paper and its discussion by leading British social scientists and authors are examined in detail. Wells was also a forceful theorist of

the nature of literature, arguing that the modern novel was not limited to a particular aesthetic form or to the creation of a singular effect, and should instead be understood as the literary exploration of social adjustment, actively engaging the reader in problems of ethical conduct. His science fiction has a firm basis in his own researches into contemporary social conditions and was understood as a mode of rigorous social scientific study of the possibilities of social transformation. Examples from his studies of social invention, including *Anticipations* (1901) and other works, and his popular science fiction, including *The Time Machine* (1895) and others, are identified in the paper.

Gabriel Tarde, known today primarily as an early sociologist, also wrote a major work of speculative fiction titled *Fragment d'histoire future* in 1896. This work, originally published in the *Revue internationale de Sociologie* and referred to by Tarde as a “sociological fantasy” or “sociological novel,” uses the device of the fading out of the sun to examine the possible consequences of more intensive social relationships that might develop without the necessary dependence on natural cycles and their dangers. He explored the possible aesthetic and intellectual utopia that could emerge from intensified social relations, and he thus presented a vision of progress toward a society in which the dialectics of individual innovation and social imitation for which he is famously known are overcome by a generalized sociality. Several extended commentaries on the work were made in early French sociological debates, and the English translation carries a critical introduction by H. G. Wells, which are further examined in the paper.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, recently rediscovered as an early feminist social theorist, wrote a trilogy of science fiction novels titled *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916). In these works she attempted to meticulously trace the conditions that could lead in the future to egalitarian gender and work relations, and to examine the fundamental transformations in the nature of human thought and behavior that could result from such social change. Her work is in part a direct commentary upon Wells’ novels, and is also connected to an explicit theory of the nature of literature. Gilman considered literature to be superior to other rhetorical modes, including exhortative sermons and technical sociological treatises (both of which she also wrote), in its ability to reach mass audiences and stimulate actual change through engagement of the audience’s critical intellectual abilities. She also participated in the American Sociological Society meetings and in private correspondence with other early American social scientists.

Although there has been increasing scrutiny to the literary output of W. E. B. Du Bois, his novels and early science fiction stories have remained an unresolved puzzle for reconstructive scholarship in sociology. His 1920 short story “The Comet,” in particular, has sparked a large number of commentaries and reprintings in the twenty-first century, some considering it a founding document in Black science fiction or Afrofuturism. Other important literary works include his 1911 *The Quest for the Silver Fleece*, 1928 *The Dark Princess*, the short story “Princess Steel” from around 1905, and his later *Black Flame* trilogy of novels (1957-1961). He wrote about how literature and art, more generally, can provide an avenue for people to understand one another across social divisions, a way to flesh out historical research by working out how people acted and thought when these cannot be recovered from the historical record, and a mode of critical commentary on the discipline of sociology.

These authors treated literature not as “fictional” in the sense of false, but instead as a mode of social knowledge, especially knowledge of possible futures and social change. But unlike the “novel with a purpose,” they were exploratory or illustrative rather than exhortative. These authors used fantastical literary devices – mind-altering dust from a comet, a time machine, the death of the sun, a quarter-century amnesia, parthenogenic birth – as premises by which to examine social transformation in a plausible or accountable way from a suitable critical distance. And they were not merely in dialogue with one another, but were part of a larger foundational debate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on the nature of sociology, its mode of scientific account, its proper scope, and its relation to other forms of social knowledge. These authors were taken seriously in the works of those recognized today as foundational sociologists, including Albion Small, Lester F. Ward, and Robert E. Park, and later Louis Wirth and William F. Ogburn, whose reactions traced in the paper help define their understandings of sociology.

This discussion is used to identify the questions raised by this early debate for any utopian enterprise in social science. Does speculative literature, done with a conscientious orientation toward conditions of possibility and plausible transformations, have a place as a mode of sociological study? Can speculative literature be understood to play the same social functions in contemporary society as it has in the past, or how else might we present an argument about fundamental social change? Are we now in a better place as a discipline to understand the conditions and mechanisms of social change such that our utopias would be more realizable? In what sense can possible futures be the subject of rigorous sociological study?

The “sociology of literature” has been renewed in recent years, especially by drawing from sociological studies of cultural production and circulation processes, and some of this emerging literature has explicitly returned to insights from the classical period in sociology. There was a broad consensus among many early social scientists and theorists on the social importance of literature. Previous scholarship has written about the uses of literature for social scientific purposes as well as the literary aspects of sociology itself. There have been small pockets of interest in the sociology of science fiction, for instance, that examine the ways speculative literature shapes collective understanding and action toward the future.