

Kill the classics: Are the social sciences living in the past?

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“In science, each of us knows that what he has accomplished will be antiquated in ten, twenty, fifty years. That is the fate to which science is subject [...] Whoever wishes to serve science has to resign himself to this fact.”

- Max Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’ (Wissenschaft als Beruf)
Lecture at Munich University, 1917

The discipline of sociology stands in an exceptional position within the sphere of the sciences – it is one of the few disciplines in which the past, as opposed to the present or the future, occupies a very prominent position. What defines many sociologists, and provides an identity to them and their work, is an intimate knowledge of certain classical thinkers, and adherence to schools of thought or traditions founded in the late 19th century and early 20th century particularly in France, England and Germany later to be extended to the American continent. This obsession with the past makes sociologists, unfamiliar to natural scientists but relatively similar to scholars within the humanities, constantly evoke and praise their founders, celebrate the classics, and dwell in past academic achievements in an endless stream of new sociology books about the great classic books of the old sociology.

There is a stark difference between the cultures of the social sciences and the natural sciences. Hardly any respected researcher working within the natural sciences would today think of quoting Newton or Copernicus as sources of ultimate wisdom or as defenses in academic disputes. However, sociology continues to quote Marx, Durkheim and Weber from the last couple of centuries as if they were the lasting authority on social and economic issues of today – a world that has probably changed dramatically in technology and global arrangements since these masters were alive? The reasons are to be found in the widespread confusion in sociology pertaining to its own scientific status and identity. Is the “social science” of sociology a child of the natural sciences or an offspring of the humanities? The result of this confusion was that the classics seemed the only secure, solid and unchanging point of reference and have remained so for the past 150 years in sociology.

This hold of the past on the mind-set of sociologists affects their way of seeing the present day world and the construction and discovery of new theories, methods and perspectives in sociology. Does this feature of sociology, an obsession with classics, hamper or facilitate the social sciences to move ahead the way a science should?

There is an ongoing debate within the social sciences and there are two schools of thought. One group of scholars in contemporary sociology want to rid themselves of the classical heritage, regarded as outdated. They argue that what ‘dead people’ said is not necessarily important today, and that the theory-heavy section of sociology is expanding at the cost of sensible empirical research relevant to today. This group often find the classics as a burdensome hindrance to academic progress.

Still others, it seems the majority, revere and embrace the classical traditions and the invaluable insights they contribute to contemporary sociology as well as to understanding today’s society. This second group dominates the academic agenda and have created a veritable cult of the classics in which identity, status and community is based on the reading, interpretation, rereading and reinterpretation of classical texts.

The Dead Sociologists' Society

The book by Nancy H. Kleinbaum, which later turned into a box office success, titled *The Dead Poets' Society* vividly demonstrated exactly from within the realm of the humanities how the teaching of and gathering around the classical past could create a sense of togetherness, inspiration, heightened awareness and mutual interest. The background for the book were the literary classics such as Keats, Yeats, Shakespeare and Whitman but could equally illustrate how sociological classics constitute mental monuments around which scholars and academics ceremonially and ritually gather.

In hardly any other scientific discipline are so many pieces published year in and year out on the past deeds and practices of the founders as in sociology or the humanities. A large proportion of the books and articles published deal with origins, ancestry and heritage of the life and deeds of the founders. This would never be the case within the natural sciences; books showing a scientist's scholarly understanding of Copernicus, Newton and Galileo are seldom used as justification for one's own current scientific practices. It also points to deep chasms within and between different scientific cultures.

The social sciences, including sociology, stand in a middle-position between the soft humanities and the hard, exact natural sciences, which meant that they imitated traits from both disciplinary 'cultures'. Sociologist Bennett M. Berger, commented on the hybrid nature of sociology: *"It is the bastard son of the humanities, from which it gets its subject matter, and the sciences, from which it gets its methods. Fully acknowledged by neither parent, it finds itself in the role of upstart"*.

Sociology is seldom about stern principles or prediction, as for example law studies or economics, and thus the proximity to the humanities is substantial. Moreover, sociology is unique in the sense, together with most of the other social sciences, that very few 'scientific revolutions' or 'radical discoveries' occur that entirely alters the research agenda, as is sometimes the case within the natural sciences. This means that it is seldom that the wisdom of yesteryears and erstwhile scholars are abandoned altogether. This is perhaps why Marx, Weber and Durkheim are discussed as vividly today in sociology. Generally speaking, one can claim that where natural sciences appear to be cumulative when it comes to the production of knowledge, the humanities and the social sciences, on the other hand seem repetitive.

The centrality of the classics in the social sciences

Ever since the debate between Alvin Gouldner and Alfred Whitehead on the classical heritage and its importance, sociologists have either opposed or supported the necessity of the central status the classics have occupied.

The reason behind the virtual immortality of the classics in sociology is that they fulfil a 'functional need' in the integration of the discipline or discourse, which would otherwise be in danger of becoming fragmented. However, scholars who believe that only Weber, Marx, Durkheim, etc. exclusively have been able to understand, theorize or investigate society in a satisfying manner are equivalent to people trying to stand on one leg for a long time. First, their posture is obviously unstable, looks ridiculous and is for that reason often also a rather lonely activity. Second, their academic enemies will know exactly which leg to chew at to make them crumble. Finally, when their sole supportive leg is eventually undermined, which is always a matter of time, they will experience the agony and embarrassment of collapsing.

Talking about the classics in sociology, especially and almost exclusively three names are often mentioned as so-called 'paradigmatic' figures – Marx, Durkheim and Weber. By paradigmatic it is meant that they are seen as role models and have set the standards of scientific practice to be emulated by others.

Thus, the status of the classics in sociology, as Lawrence Sherman (1974) reminds us, is bound up with the general view on sociology, one holds. Sherman illustrates three possible ideal type sociological scenarios: (1) That sociologists search for and want to discover universal social laws (Durkheim), (2) that they want to interpret and understand the social world (Weber), and (3) that they want to change it (Marx).

Whereas most sociologists will have to be satisfied with following the principle of *publish and perish*, the classics, on the other hand, show a remarkable persistence and endurance within the discipline even in times marked by rapid change and academic uprooting. However, despite their persistence, classics are far from immortal and they *can* indeed be ritually and symbolically killed although within sociology that is a seldom occurrence. This occurs if they are forgotten, by design or default, are gradually or suddenly removed from institutional curriculum, are devalued or discredited, or simply found insufficient or unfitting for contemporary concerns.

Understanding and classifying something as classic

[One] way to find out the importance of the past is looking to the quantitative weight and presence of the classics in the articles and books written within the confines of the discipline. Here a simple content analysis would *probably*, lacking any concrete data material, reveal that the classics are still very much present and frequently quoted and debated in most of the major journals and maintained in the indexes of most books published if not occupying large proportions of them.

Another concrete way to document the importance of the classics in contemporary sociology would be to inquire about the status and importance of the classics in study programs of sociology courses around the world. Here one would *probably* discover that the classics still occupy the core position in most curricula whether in the North, South, East or West.

Robert W. Connell once asked: *why* is classical theory actually classical? By classical, we mean something or someone who belongs to another period of time, to a defining or fateful moment in history or to the birth of a discipline. Within the context of sociology, this period of time is the epoch we also label as 'modernity'. Thus, the sociology classics are often equated with scholars during a certain period ranging from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century.

The classic scholars of sociology all wrote in this tumultuous time and commented, often critically, on it. These scholars took a keen interest in theorizing, dealing with aspects of modernization and its impact on society – seen in an overtly optimistic or equally pessimistic perspective. They have achieved or been bestowed the status of classics – they are being read, discussed, dissected, analyzed, quoted, imitated and their works are lavishly being published and republished. The classics in sociology are thus, it is generally agreed, equivalent to its founders. Today, very few articles or books, if any, within the field of sociology are written, irrespective of the topic, which refrain from lengthy discussions of or introductions and references to these four founders.

Italian writer Italo Calvino is a stout defender and sympathizer of the classical heritage; not as something to be addressed as awe-inspiring authorities or endlessly reproduced but as an emporium for insight, inspiration and imagination. His perspective is more oriented towards the (individual) experience the reader gets when reading a classic than on the (institutional) role the classics might play for a discipline.

They should stand as sources of inspiration and stimulation however not as a blind and uncritical rehashing of past glory and achievements. The ‘real’ classics are thus classics because they seem to be spiritually alive, despite perhaps having been physically dead and buried for many decades or even centuries – because the provided concepts or theories still seem poignant, precise or potent.

Problems with excessive use of classics in sociology

I believe that one of the major functions of the classics in sociology have first and foremost been that they throughout a long period of time have helped legitimize the discipline. The problem in sociology, as I see it, is that the classics have come to occupy a position not as background noise, as Calvino recommended, but as a resounding choir of authoritative voices hindering and hampering scientific progression and innovation. Without wishing to sound excessively dramatic, sociologists are, in short, caught up in the classics and need to ask, as global society, economy and democracy are in a churn and in the throes of multiple recessions and warfare, where do we go from here?

Peter Baehr, who provided us with a definition of ‘classicality’, also observed in *Founders, Classics and Canons*: “A classical legacy can both be a source of inspiration for an epoch or a crushing and stagnating burden on it [...] It can both exclude potentially valuable ideas and prove capable of embracing them. It can both be a source of mindless regurgitation and of bracing intellectual challenge.” Left to themselves, as Collins finds, the classics are nothing but great ideas on blank sheets of paper, the mindless reproduction of which only serves to imprison the minds of students and teachers alike and stagnate intellectual innovation.

Stagnation, however, is not the only problem posed by very rigid definitions and utilizations of the classics. Selectivity, understood as inclusion and exclusion, is another pitfall dealing with who is promoted to intellectual immortality and who is relegated to immediate oblivion. Why do we read, for example, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, but not Condorcet, Comte, Saint Simon, Spencer, de Tocqueville, Mosca, Pareto, Tarde, Michels, Lippmann, Sorokin, etc.? Why has exactly this trinity of thinkers, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, obtained and maintained such a prominent position within sociology on behalf of equally brilliant analysts of their contemporary societies? These important names appear to be missing from most sociological curricula today and may have been victims of what Giddens described as a desire to distance sociology from its supposedly pre-scientific origins. As James Dowd remarked:

An educational program constitutes a type of canon. It specifies, although not always explicitly, an authoritative, approved list of courses, authors, works, and ideas [...] The canon of sociology includes a set of texts written by the sociologists of the classical period, a set of procedures for conducting the research and for analyzing the data that it produces, and a set of ideas (that is concepts, generalizations, and theories)...

Intellectual stagnation and selective memory are thus some of the problems related to the mindless devotion to the cult of the classics in sociology.

Can we kill the classics?

Sociology is by its very nature a hybrid discipline, borrowing equally from the natural sciences and the humanities. From the former it finds the tendency for devaluation of the classics; from the latter it finds the tendency to worship the classics and the preoccupation with dissecting the past in its own right. Sociology is caught in the middle, which means that it is not exempt from the habit of either embracing or running away from its own past. This double-edged mentality is still present within the discipline and results in the fact that the classical past stands in an increasingly precarious or ambivalent situation.

My personal answer is in the negative. The reasons why the classics ought to be kept alive in the years ahead need to be clarified and discussed collectively among practicing sociologists. Some will claim that the classics need to be read and discussed because they can guide contemporary social action. This, I believe, is to demand too much of ideas and theories of the past. The functionality of the classics can no longer solely rely on their external power of explanation of the present situation, which is different from even the most visionary expectations of the founders. Italo Calvino also concluded his argument about the role and function of the classics by stating that the *“classics ought to be read because they ‘serve any purpose’ whatever. The only reason one can possibly adduce is that to read the classics is better than not to read the classics.”*

The classics and their concepts still clutter the house of sociology. Norwegian sociologist Dag Østerberg, who for almost a lifetime has taken a keen interest in the classics, also recently discussed whether the classical concepts, formulated in large part in the 19th and early 20th century, are still analytically valid and still worthwhile utilizing for sociologists when studying the rapidly changing social world of the 21st century. According to Østerberg, we will always have the key classical concepts of industrialism, capitalism, stratification, rationalization, differentiation, power, community, etc. to fall back upon.

We must be careful not to forget our founders; but we must also beware not to allow their ideas to monopolize our visions, as Danish sociologist Dominique Bouchet recently stated: *“Nothing is more dangerous than one idea, when you only have one... It is wondering, the many ideas, the many masters, the many critical perspectives that society and the sociological imagination feed on.”* This not only pertains to trained scholars but equally to those being processed through the educational system and therefore we ought not to teach our students the marvels of a myopic mentality when it comes to classics. Pluralism is the best possible starting point for any education and here there should be interest in showing the broad spectrum of sociological insights offered by the classics instead of narrowing it down to one's own favorites or heroes. It is our democratic duty to do so and the classics, collectively instead of individually, can widen our perspectives and open our eyes.

Classics are indeed books that are full to the brim of fertile thinking for those who read them and whose own work is inspired by them. It is perhaps in this somewhat informal capacity that the chances of survival, but also of a continued although latent and unobtrusive presence, for the classics is strongest and it will be here they will eventually have to find their own natural level in sociology.

Looking back at the by now long history of sociology, it makes some sense to seek to distinguish between ‘classics’, those original founders of the discipline who stand out as if marked in granite in contemporary curriculum, the ‘intermediary classics’, who elaborated on, modified, or criticized the classics, and the ‘neo-classics’ still alive or only recently demised and actively present in contemporary scholarly debates. Neo-classics will, naturally and eventually, in time, turn out to be intermediary classics and later perhaps even become real or genuine classics when time takes its toll and their contributions are looked upon in historical hindsight. There is inherently, as a consequence, some circularity, but also repetition and reproduction, in the concept of the classics. This may lead to some problems primarily for scientific progress and secondarily for sociological integration – both problems can prove detrimental to scientific development and coherence.

The classics can serve as scaffolds that can buttress sociological heritage and history but, as Erving Goffman noted, scaffolds are supposed to be dismantled once the real building has been erected. As scaffolds, the classics can assist contemporary sociologists in identifying past pedigree and can serve as a common point of reference but they cannot and should not dictate current research agendas. The thin line between utilizing and sanctifying the classics is indeed delicate and one must be careful not to cross it. The use of the classics must never merely be reproduction or exegesis without anchorage in contemporary concerns. The result of such fanatic reproduction may well turn out to be *sociological stagnation* where scientific progress, discoveries and advancements are hindered by a preoccupation with the past instead of an open orientation towards the present and the future, where a desire to legitimize previous authoritative achievements stand in the way of discovering or inventing something new. A sociological imagination worthy of its name and useful to generation after generation of students and scholars never sleeps but is continuously kept abreast by the changes in society.

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