

CHAPTER 28

AFTERWORD

SOCIOLOGICAL CLASSICS AND THE CANON IN THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONS

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A distinctive feature of many parts of sociology, including organizational sociology, is their impulse towards classicism and their evident veneration of the ancestors. In an oft-quoted quip attributed to Jim Davis, sociologists seeking to publish a finding need to cite a dead German who said it first. Some influential neoclassical scholars manage to get this requirement out of the way in the very first sentence (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell 1983), while others wait until the literature review. Still others find that the current stock of dead Germans (or other venerated sociologists) is not sufficient for their purposes and seek to trace a lineage to an eminent theorist and convert them to sociology retroactively. Baudrillard's standing in sociology, for instance, was undoubtedly aided by Veblen's posthumous conversion (Kellner 1989). Authors in this volume find overlooked ancestors in organizational sociology to include Tocqueville, Tarde, and Commons, and make a compelling case for their continuing relevance.

In some scientific domains outside of sociology, one could win a Nobel Prize without ever having perused that field's classic works. The great majority of psychologists can safely ignore William James even if they are housed in a building bearing his name, as at Harvard—and how many economists have made it past chapter 3 of *The Wealth of Nations*? Yet few sociologists can afford to be unfamiliar with Max Weber, who apparently said that Protestantism was important for capitalism. This observation suggests that sociology is indeed part science and part humanities (Zald 1991–2, 1993). Like humanists, sociologists believe they can do better work when informed by how the luminaries of the past have done it—or at least those currently considered luminaries when prelim exam committees draw up their reading lists. But why do they think that? Why do sociologists care about the classics, and why should we read a book about the classics?

Art Stinchcombe (1982) gave an influential answer to the first question when he described six functions of classics (see Thornton, in this volume, for a more extended discussion). The first function was to serve as examples of excellence that we can hope to emulate. The second was to provide developmental tasks to make minds more complex—in particular, the minds of graduate students as we prepare them to enter the profession. A third function is to act as shorthand for identifying one's tradition in the first paragraph of a paper, so that the readers know how to read the rest of it (or whether they want to). Fourth, the classics help us to understand the genealogy of fundamental ideas in a field, the lineage from the trunk to the branches (to mix metaphors). Fifth, the classics can be used as a source of hypotheses that have not yet been fully explored. Finally, the classics have a ritual function to bind together the profession and give it a sense of shared history. Stinchcombe's point was that 'classics' need not meet all of these criteria—they can be classic in one way (e.g. as a shorthand for identifying the literature one hopes to contribute to) without being classic in another (e.g. as a source of unplumbed empirical insights), and it is best not to confuse these functions by imagining that exemplars of one function are also necessarily exemplary in the other ways.

We could add some other functions for a book about sociological classics of organization studies. The first is to provide CliffsNotes; or, how to talk about books you have not read. Many American sociologists, for instance, may not be familiar with the works of Norbert Elias, and a cook's tour can be a good introduction (and, ideally, an impetus to read the originals). The second function is to introduce great unread (or under-read) authors (e.g. Gabriel Tarde; see Czarniawska, in this volume) whose works deserve to be in the canon. A third function is to revise how we think of great *misread* authors. Max Weber, for instance, first became known to most North American sociologists through Talcott Parsons's translations, yet these translations often included a clear Parsonian inflection that may be at odds with what Weber intended (see Clegg and Lounsbury, and du Gay, in this volume). Finally, a book about classics can help us understand authors in their social context. It is enlightening to know that Follett and Dewey were

not just contemporaries, but familiar and even adversarial (see Ansell, in this volume).

This book accomplishes all of these ends, although the authors vary on which function they emphasize. In this brief commentary, we want to meditate a bit about classics and the canon—how and why works enter and exit required reading lists for certified sociologists—what ‘canon studies’ might tell us, and what we might still learn from classic works about how to theorize more fruitfully today.

28.1. THE CLASSICS AND THE CANON: ENTRY AND EXIT

The essays in this volume have largely not told a story of how the classic authors became classic; instead, the essays have assumed that the classics deserve to be more widely used, or have been neglected in recent years and ought to be resurrected, or that other works by the authors of classics deserve attention. Many of the essays assume that the classical authors were widely acknowledged as important in their own time, and it is only that we are currently provincial or uneducated that has led to their neglect.

While it is useful to re-examine the works of the great authors of classics and attempt to educate the current generation of scholars about what from the past might be useful now and in the future, it is also useful to step back from this somewhat ahistorical and unsociological approach and ask a set of broader questions: How are the classics constructed? What is the intellectual, social, and disciplinary context in which the classic works are written and why are they seen in their time as important, or, if neglected, unimportant? What is the process by which the canonical works are established as part of the foundational writings for a field or sub-field? Are there aspects of the classic works that are given a specific interpretation or reading, so that later generations use the work in a somewhat different manner than earlier uses? Why are some authors added to the list of what is considered canonical? And why do some authors, or works of particular authors, get excluded at a later point in time?

These questions suggest a broad agenda for thinking about the classics. The classics may be important for the insight they can give to particular lines of research. But it is also important to see the role they play in shaping the definition and image of what the discipline or sub-discipline is about. What are the orientations—intellectual, social, and political—that the set of works that are widely viewed to be central, less central, and, at the extreme, ignored tell us are the focal points for analysis in the living canon of the current generation of scholars?

Note that reading and thinking about the classics is not usually done in the natural sciences. Very few physicists today read Newton; rather they are taught the distilled and what are believed to be useful parts of his work, with little revisiting of early formulations or attention to the parts of his work that were dismissed as the scientific revolution took hold. (Newton was famously committed to alchemy.) Attention to the classics and the canon is more common in the humanities than in natural sciences. The curriculum in some parts of the humanities, especially in literature departments, but also in art history, and to some extent in philosophy has been substantially devoted to interpreting past exemplars, the works seen as great. It is also recognized that classics are in some sense 'constructed' as critics, teachers, and readers (of literature or poetry) and viewers (of art) engage in acts of using and evaluating the works. Works become part of the canon as they achieve high valuation, and their reputation is carried forward in the curriculum and in the consuming public (whether passive audience or active researchers and critics).

The distinction between a classic and the canon is important, but not widely noted in sociology and social science. Indeed, until the 1970s, scholars in the humanities largely assumed the canon, rather than asking how and why it was created, although there were debates about the criteria for inclusion of specific kinds of work. But the radicalization of the curriculum and the pressure from suppressed groups for recognition of 'their' classics forced an examination of how the canon was constructed, why some forms of literature or art were included, and others excluded, why few women and African-Americans authors or artists were included in the then acceptable curricula. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993), professor of comparative literature John Guillory develops a sociologically sophisticated analysis of how the canon was created in the study of English literature in the United States. The book draws heavily on Pierre Bourdieu and Marxist analyses of the superstructure. The canon is created as part of the game of developing cultural capital in the sphere of distinguishing literary, aesthetic, and moral elites. Writers, critics, scholars, and teachers contest criteria of evaluation. They do this at an abstract level, but also in producing anthologies of poetry and short stories, and required novels to meet the needs of a standardized curriculum for high schools, colleges, and universities. Debates about the canon have implications for publishing houses, for students, and for careers. The intent was to hold up exemplars of literary taste, which demonstrated aesthetic, moral, and spiritual value for whites of the upper and middle class. The purpose of developing the canon was to elevate the standards of what counted as being educated. The standards were developed with the assumption that works included fit the needs of a homogeneous elite. Racial, ethnic, and alternative gender identities were submerged and ignored. The canon defined the kinds of literary works (e.g. poetry and drama, and, later British and European novels) and within these forms, the specific works that were believed to have the most aesthetic and substantive value. It is well to remember that it is only fifty years or so ago, that recently published novels began

be studied in university curricula in the United States, and 150 years ago, most students in universities learned Latin and Greek. When novels first appeared and reached mass audiences, they were read and discussed outside of university settings (Graff 1987).

Classics can be seen as the exemplary works of a particular kind. In the social sciences, they are the foundational studies and their descendants that provide answers to substantive and methodological problems. The canon is the collection of surviving classics; some earlier ones eliminated as interests shift and as more 'satisfactory' forms of analysis are adopted by academic communities. The relation of classics to the canon can be seen as analogous to the relationship of species of trees to the forest; the ecology of the canon makes certain kinds of classics less likely to survive; in fact, although a rebirth may occur (similar to a long hibernation, to mix metaphors), shifts in the intellectual, social, and political environment and in the approved forms of persuasive rhetoric (e.g. hypothetical-deductive, mathematical, objective language, formal, reflective, literary) shape the distribution of species in the canon. And in some cases, the species is eliminated.

The study of the classics in organizational theory is a study of the genealogy of particular types of exemplary interpretations for a range of phenomena and the successive important iterations on the themes of the foundational exemplars as perceived by scholars working in a somewhat similar domain at later points in time. The study of the canon would focus on the reasons that certain kinds of theories are selected at one point in time, while they are excluded at a later point in time. To study the genealogy of the classics is to focus on one line of analysis at a time. To study the transformation of the canon requires us to look over time at what is included or excluded. For instance, one could look at the shifting reading lists of graduate courses on organization theory. It is our impression that the works of Alfred DuPont Chandler, Jr. (1962, 1977) are no longer widely included. Yet, thirty years ago, they were. Chandler stands as the exemplar of the structural analysis of the large corporation; the decline in his use and of others of a structural persuasion represents a change in the canon. (We expand on this change in the next section). Similarly, the fact that Weber on bureaucracy is used in a more ceremonial way, rather than substantively, is also related to the declining relevance of the analysis of the structure of organizations and the organization of offices. Of course, it is worth noting that Weberian emphases on bureaucratic rationality are still very relevant for the study of public administration, especially in the context of developing countries (Evans and Rauch 1999, 2000). On the other hand, Simmel becomes more important, as network and relational analysis, within and between organizations, becomes a focal point of social and economic processes (see Scott, in this volume).

Other canon changes can be noted: in the 1950s hardly any courses in the sociology of organizations, whether in departments of sociology or schools of management, had syllabi dealing with leftist and Marxist works. Indeed, in the United States, discussion of Marxist theory was politically suppressed in the public sphere,

and intellectually denigrated in many academic circles. As calls for the transformation of society and organizations increased in the 1960s and 1970s, works that had a Marxist tinge, whether dealing with labor process or class domination and conflict, became more widely read. By the end of the century, Marxist works had not been suppressed, but are clearly less widely used. Although ‘critical’ analysis can be seen as a descendent of both Marxist and Frankfurt approaches, the Foucauldian turn gives it a quite different inflection.

Note, too, that because organizational studies is partly both a scientific and humanistic enterprise, the surrounding societal and intellectual culture has a greater impact upon local canons than would be found in disciplines such as mathematics or geology. Marxist, critical, and discourse-based approaches have a greater role even at elite institutions in Europe and Australia than in America. We know of no American management school that recruits explicitly for ‘critical’ scholars, although that occurs regularly in Canada and England.

28.2. WHY NOW? THE RENEWED RELEVANCE OF ‘CLASSICS’

As already mentioned, an important reason to read the classics and contemplate the canon draws on Stinchcombe’s ‘exemplar’ function. Stinchcombe notes that Claude Lévi-Strauss used to read a few pages of the *18th Brumaire* to remind himself of how it was done when it was done well. Some classics provide a (perhaps) achievable standard of excellence that we might hold in our mind in setting our own aspirations as theorists. We would argue that there is a specific sense in which we need examples of ‘doing it well’ now. Many of the great social theorists read by organizational sociologists can be seen as documenting and grappling with the birth of a society of organizations (or more acutely, a society of corporations) out of the previous system of competitive capitalism (e.g. Clemens, in this volume). By some accounts, we are currently observing the death throes of that system, as signified by terms such as post-industrial, post-Fordist, post-statist, globalized capitalism. The study of the classics can inform contemporary theorists not so much by providing ideas to be tested (e.g. does Google conform to the core features of bureaucracy identified by Weber), but as styles of theorizing when you are not sure what your object is yet.

Several classics of organizational sociology covered in this book were explicitly or implicitly concerned with making sense of the rise of corporate industrial capitalism. During the period that many of our theorists wrote, Western economies were in transition from agriculture to mass production manufacturing. In the

United States, for instance, 42 percent of the working population was spread among six million farms at the end of the nineteenth century. Within two generations, nearly half the labor force worked in manufacturing. New forms of work and social organization were arising and spreading, particularly Fordist mass production and the social forms that arose around it. Peter Drucker wrote in 1949 that 'the representative, the decisive, industrial unit is the large, mass-production plant, managed by professionals without ownership-stake, employing thousands of people, and organized on entirely different technological, social, and economic principles' from the enterprises of competitive capitalism (1949: 22). Moreover, 'The big enterprise is the true symbol of our social order. ... In the industrial enterprise the structure which actually underlies all our society can be seen' (*ibid.* 29). The principles of mass production had spread beyond the factory to engulf research, education, medicine, warfare, and public administration. Yet Drucker had the benefit of seeing the 'society of organizations' in its adolescence, when its main contours had already been worked out. The early twentieth-century theorists were there at its birth.

In hindsight, it is clear that large corporations were en route to becoming the dominant social structures in society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The broad outlines of the new 'corporate system' were evident by the early 1930s, when Berle and Means wrote their famous book. By that point, the largest 200 corporations controlled half of industry's assets, and almost half of these firms were under the control of professional managers. The result was a new kind of social system. 'The economic power in the hands of the few persons who control a giant corporation is a tremendous force which can harm or benefit a multitude of individuals, affect whole districts, shift the currents of trade, bring ruin to one community and prosperity to another. The organizations which they control have passed far beyond the realm of private enterprise—they have become more nearly social institutions' (Berle and Means [1932] 1991: 46). By mid-century it was widely believed by American social scientists of various stripes that corporations and other large-scale organizations had absorbed much of American society. Economist Carl Kaysen wrote in 1957 that 'The whole labor force of the modern corporation is, insofar as possible, turned into a corps of lifetime employees, with great emphasis on stability of employment' (1957: 312), and as a result 'membership in the modern corporation becomes the single strongest social force shaping its career members' (*ibid.* 318). Complex organizations evidently merited their own distinct sub-discipline. Thus, March and Simon described the individual organization as 'a sociological unit comparable in significance to the individual organism in biology' (1958: 4), yet one about which little was known systematically. Organizational sociology took it from there.

The idea of 'society' as a unit of analysis was also still relatively new and contested, but further ratified by processes around the time of industrialization. Espeland and Stevens (1998) describe how the evolution of statistics in its original sense in the

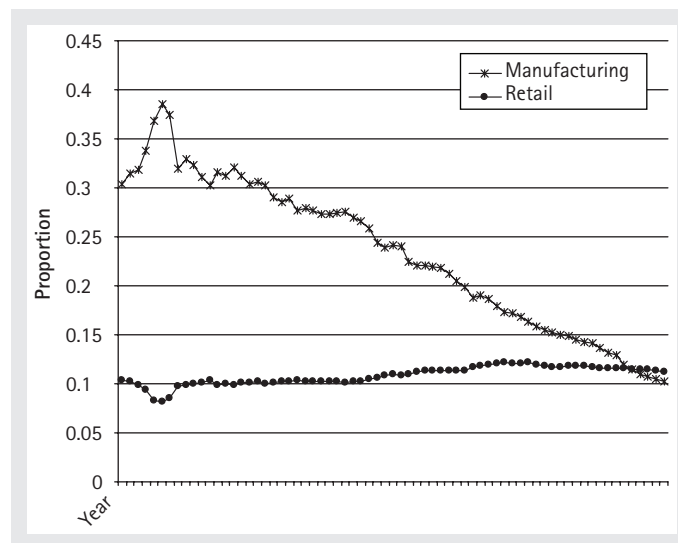


Fig. 28.1. Proportion of the US non-farm labor force employed in manufacturing and retail, 1939–2007

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics

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1820s and 1830s—of counting entities, such as persons—enabled the discovery of regularities in things such as suicide rates. It also induced the discussion of units of analysis of which the rates were a property, such as ‘society’ or the nation-state. The notion of societies that were coherent and separate from other societies and were roughly coterminous with contemporary nation-states—entities that had a comprehensible structure and trajectory (e.g. determined by class struggle)—was relatively new, and it made a discipline that studied such units plausible.

But in the past few decades many of the transitions that sociological classics addressed have been transcended. The idea of a society of organizations made sense in Kaysen’s time, when industrial corporations sought to cultivate career ‘members’ and pay them pensions when they retired. But by the mid-1990s, more Americans worked in retail than in all of manufacturing, and Wal-Mart had replaced GM as the largest private employer (Scott and Davis 2007). Figure 28.1 shows the secular decline in manufacturing employment as a proportion of the non-farm labor force from 1944 until 2007. It takes little imagination to project where the trend is headed: just since the start of the Bush administration, over three million manufacturing jobs—18 percent of that sector’s employment—have been lost. The shift to post-industrialism has meant that organizations no longer envelop the social lives of their members and structure their careers, and even the notion of ‘membership’ is suspect given the relatively short attachments between employees and firms in the predominant service organizations. To give a recent example: in 2006 there were 400,000 mortgage brokers working in 50,000 firms in the United States. The

business of intermediating between home borrowers and lenders—an industry that was virtually non-existent two decades previously, when banks and S & Ls wrote mortgages—employed more Americans than the entire textile industry. Moreover, in light of the 2007 mortgage meltdown, the industry is likely to be nearly non-existent again in 2008.

As legal fictions, corporations are still powerful actors, but they are no longer the encompassing entities contemplated by the ‘society of organizations’. And much the same can be said about states. Michael Burawoy (2005) pointed out in his ASA Presidential Address that ‘Globalization is wreaking havoc with sociology’s basic unit of analysis—the nation-state—while compelling deparochialization of our discipline.’ We cannot take for granted that a society is coterminous with a nation-state (or states). Following the lead of corporations, states have found that they can use offshore providers for some revenue-generating functions (e.g. licensing corporations and ships, in the case of Liberia), and even outsource some of their most basic functions (e.g. paramilitary violence against unarmed civilians, in the case of Blackwater). States are now just one vendor among many competing for the custom of their (corporate and other) consumers. A post-nation-state, post-corporate world requires new ways of theorizing about social structure from the ways in which we were trained.

Examining the classics might help us theorize our contemporary transition away from a society of organizations. We can learn much by appreciating the context of ideas, for instance, the link between American pragmatism and the rise of stock markets and large-scale industrial capitalism in the United States. The social history of ideas gives useful clues, for example, the parallels between Marx and Darwin in their imageries of change are perhaps analogous to the widespread use of network imagery in contemporary natural and social science. Many ideas from prior theorists lie fallow and then become revived due to their new applicability. Industrial districts and the continuing centrality of geography for economic activity, for instance, were largely ignored by American theorists between the time of Alfred Marshall (1920) and that of Piore and Sabel (1984). And Veblen’s most famous idea, of conspicuous consumption, went from a peculiarity of the wealthy at the turn of the twentieth century to a dominant social motif at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The authors of several chapters point to particular styles of theorizing that have regained their relevance, namely, how to understand organizing and extra-organizational processes. For roughly a decade, many organizational theorists have gradually begun to classify themselves as economic sociologists, which is further reflected in the dominance of neo-institutional and network approaches to theory. Organizations, in other words, need no longer be the predominant object of organizational research, as many of the processes of interest transcend particular organizations. As described by Abbott (in this volume), the old Chicago School also studied the organizing of human activities without focusing on formal

organizations as distinct objects. Schumpeter unpacks the structures for entrepreneurial action inside and outside organizations (Knudsen and Becker, in this volume). And Elias provides a model of examining large-scale evolutionary processes linking the micro to the macro (see van Itersen, in this volume).

28.3. CONCLUSION

The essays in this volume present a feast for reflection on the continuing relevance and sometimes irrelevance of past works. The classics and the canon evolve. Unlike the elimination of species that occurs in biotic evolution, the evolution of the canon allows for the recall, possibly in reinvigorated forms, of what were once classics, or had been published in some form. It is at least possible that the classics of tomorrow may have had little fame or reputation when they first appeared. We have no idea whether there are hidden jewels out there, just waiting for some scholar to make claims about their importance for current or future thinking. It is easiest to suppose that some work of an eminent scholar that had little resonance in its time deserves contemporary currency. When the 'cultural turn' in sociology and organizational studies occurred, scholars turned to Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1965). When population ecology approaches to organizations flourished in the 1970s, Amos Hawley's book (1950), largely unknown to students of organizations without grounding in human ecology, became a foundational text. It is very unlikely that a work from the past by a long dead and rarely or never cited author could suddenly be trumpeted as a classic. A work without a well-known sponsor would be kind of a virgin birth! When Thomas Kuhn discovered in its original German language form Ludwig Fleck's, *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* ([1935] 1979), only Robert K. Merton had previously read it in Harvard's Widener Library. Fleck, a Polish microbiologist, had developed the idea of a thought collective and can be seen as taking a constructionist approach to science, long before the sociology of science took that turn. Fleck showed how the diagnosis of syphilis emerged from the welter of assumptions, classifications, and research of the community of microbiologists. An annual award in Fleck's name is now given by The Society for the Social Study of Science.

This Handbook has largely focused on the classics and the canon for theoretical interpretations of important organizational and sociological substantive issues. Of course, there are also classics for methodological and analytic forms as well. There are exemplars of quantitative methods and exemplars of analytic styles. Durkheim's *Suicide* (1951) is known not largely because of its findings about rates of suicide, but for its enunciation of a sociological level of analysis not, apparently, reducible to

psychology. Case studies of organizations have exemplars that can be called classic, as can comparative studies with a small number of cases.

Although the study of organizations changes partly in response to changes in organizations as they respond to their societal and organizational context, the changes in what from the past is seen as foundational also responds to the chaotic and fractal processes within and between academic disciplines (Abbott 2001). Thus, we return to classics and reinterpret them in the context of a transformed academic discourse.

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