

“The Status of the Classics: A View from Today” (comment on Donald Levine, “The Variable Status of the Classics in Differing Narratives of the Sociological Tradition”)

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Donald Levine’s “Variable Status of the Classics” was originally presented in 1994 at the XIII World Congress of Sociology. Two decades later its most general point still holds: there is much more agreement that the classics are important in sociology than there is agreement as to why they are important. However, the intervening years have left the essay out of date in certain respects. This commentary takes stock of general trends in the literature on the classics since Levine’s paper was written, applying Levine’s typology and identifying new areas of inquiry in the study of the classics.

The first major development after the appearance of “Variable Status” was the publication of Levine’s own *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995). *Visions* further elaborated Levine’s six ideal type narrative forms and offered up the dialogical narrative as a means “to integrate [the] fragmented community” of contemporary sociology (p. 300). Levine has remained the leading voice for a dialogical interpretation of the sociological tradition, but others have picked up the project, most notably in *The Dialogical Turn* (2004), a *Festschrift* for Levine edited by Charles Camic and Hans Joas. The diverse essays in that volume demonstrate the versatility of the dialogical narrative form, which can be deployed at small and large scale and can use the classics to illuminate pressing contemporary problems in sociology (see also Joas 2000; 2013 in this regard).

Much of the remaining literature on the classics in the past twenty years belongs to what Levine calls the contextualist tradition. Here the consensus that the classics remain important in sociology persists, although the terms of why and how we should understand them remains in dispute. One rarely finds in the recent literature a serious argument against preserving *any* kind of classical tradition. Raewyn Connell’s work (1997; 2007a; 2007b) is only an apparent exception. Connell objects to the customary centralizing certain figures, topics and questions, but even her radical rejection is couched in terms of a plea for a different kind of historical consciousness for the discipline. Connell’s first major work on the interpretation of the classics condemns our adherence to a canon of works by a few great observers of European industrialism and empire, on the grounds that this canon universalizes without warrant the validity of observations arising from an “imperial gaze” (1997, 1523ff.). Here she engages in a project of what Peter Baehr has recently termed “unmasking” (Baehr and Gordon 2012). But Connell’s positive program (2007a) celebrates her own canon of exceptional individual contributions and persistent, productive questions. She argues that sociology needs to recover “southern” perspectives that are not implicated in the project of European colonialism as Marx, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, etc., are. That is to say, she argues for the canonization of a new set of classics on normative contextualist grounds.

Peter Baehr’s *Founders, Classics, Canons* (2002) offers the clearest and most persuasive account available of how the classics have entered into sociologists’ collective memory. This approach to the “status of the classics” makes it clear that all narrative interpretations of the classics are contingent on broader processes of canon formation that the interpreter inherits.

Baehr rejects the notion of “discursive founders” as an ahistorical misunderstanding, but goes on to explain how we appropriate “founders” and classics through our own discursive and institutional work—and in the process, frequently misconstrue what we have done. Baehr crosses the boundaries of Levine’s ideal types. He is at once a contextualist, offering a cogent account of sociology’s institutional coalescence; a humanist, relaying his conclusions about the status of the classics to a moral stance on the “distinct but modest” role of the university in modern society (p. 180); and finally a dialogician, seeing the classical tradition as Levine does, as a richly developed dialogue across generations, rooted in moral and political philosophy, within which exist separate constitutive sub-traditions.

In quite different ways, Connell and Baehr both challenge the terms in which debates about the classics have typically been framed (including in Levine’s article and in *Visions*), but neither of them embraces Whitehead’s uncompromising dictum. Baehr in particular has been a stalwart and eloquent defender of a rich awareness of the sociological classics for the “authorial brilliance” and continued possibilities of “interpretive appropriation” that they offer (p. 184).

Along with Connell, the authors of several anthologies and textbooks (Lemert 1999; Marshall and Witz 2004; Reed 2006; Seidman 2004) have offered introductions to the classical tradition framed by a sociology of sociology. They at once diagnose and try to correct for sociology’s past failures to analyze adequately sociologically interesting phenomena: most often gender, sexuality and political power differentials between nation states or between empires and colonies. These late twentieth century contextualists align on the view that sociology’s “classics” must now include theorists who explicitly engage these topics and who represent a broader range of ideological commitments than the European theorists of industrial modernity. Insofar as we can consider them as part of a single movement, we have to say that they have enjoyed very great success, at least in the short term. Some of the inclusions they have argued for are now *de rigueur* in textbooks on social or sociological theory. Consider, for example, Joas and Knöbl’s *Social Theory* (2009), which presents itself as “part of [an] attempt to produce a comprehensive social theory capable of meeting contemporary needs” (p. *ix*); a textbook with a clear constructive agenda that makes no pretense at neutrality. Joas and Knöbl see little value for social theory in Judith Butler and allied strands of feminist theory, or in French post-structuralism after Foucault, but they nonetheless dedicate substantial pages to both (pp. 354–370, 453–460, 462). Whether the centrality of these figures in particular will endure over the long term remains to be seen.

There have been many recent, narrowly focused publications that attempt to explain the particular status of some classical author or authors. These likewise fit under Levine’s rubric of contextualism: Baehr on Aron (2013); Bortolini on Bellah (2012); Camic on Parsons (1992); da Silva on Mead (2006; da Silva and Vieira 2011); Nichols on Merton (2010); Owens on Parsons (2010); Parker on Weber and Durkheim (1997)). While their specific emphases and conclusions vary widely, collectively they demonstrate that research into the status of the classics is alive and well as a branch of the sociology of knowledge. The sweeping claim that sociology’s canon reflects systematic biases on dimensions of race, gender or political power is inevitably underdetermining as a sociology of the classics (see Collins 1997, a sharp rejoinder to Connell), and the articles cited above offer small-scale explanatory accounts that collectively make up a much more complete picture.

Even the most well trod ground may not be fully exhausted for the sociology of the classics. Marcel Fournier has recently published illuminating biographies of Mauss (1994) and Durkheim (2007), and he argues that the continued study of even these most familiar figures can

still yield new sociological insights (2012). At the outset Fournier stakes out his own position on Durkheim as moralist and political thinker: he defended many of the liberal values of the French Third Republic but remained “deeply reformist” with a socialist bent. He is difficult to classify with “conventional ideological labels” (Fournier 2013, pp. 6–7). Informed by the sociology of science, Fournier’s biography recognizes that the multiple interpretations of Durkheim are rooted in “a lot of misunderstandings” that arose when Durkheim’s school was still institutionally in formation (p. 511). Of course, Levine in “Variable Status” discusses Durkheim interpretation as an example of how multiple interpretations of the classics can coexist in practice. Fournier makes little explicit reference to the major interpreters of Durkheim that Levine discusses. Park and Burgess, Sorokin, Parsons, Aron, Zeitlin and Gouldner appear in neither index nor bibliography of Fournier’s biography. Nisbet and Alexander receive limited treatment.

Notably lacking from the literature of the past twenty years are efforts like Levine’s own *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*: book-length efforts to recount classical sociology’s history and prehistory through a single interpretative lens. Most wide ranging, synthetic attempts to come to grips with the tradition of social theory in recent years subordinate the study of the classics to the working out of some new theoretical perspective: critical legal theory (Unger 1987) or postcolonial theory (Bhabha 1994), for example. Their references to classic texts are highly selective and allusive rather than specific; details of intellectual history are almost entirely missing. Positivist and synthetic narratives have fallen out of fashion, apparently victims of the successful contextualist drive to multiply and diversify the entry points into the sociological canon. It would be very difficult now for any author to advance a coherent positivist or synthetic narrative of social theory’s development that was *not* declaredly selective and instrumental. Joas and Knöbl’s *Social Theory* rejects the idea of an overarching developmental narrative and criticize Jeffrey Alexander’s earlier lecture series (1987) on just this point (Joas and Knöbl 2009, p. ix). Pluralist and dialogical narratives, meanwhile, can be indefinitely extended and diversified without disrupting an established account—a great asset in the current scholarly climate.

Predominantly humanist interpretations of the classics have become rare in recent years, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Baehr 2002; 2013*b*; 2013*c*; How 2007). Accelerating disciplinary diversification and fragmentation is once again a likely cause. A dual difficulty faces any renewed effort at the strong form of the humanistic interpretation: first, it is immensely difficult to characterize intelligently the diverse discipline of sociology as a whole, much less to plausibly indict it as “intellectually trivial” or “morally impoverished”; second, sociologists and even intellectual historians have less authority from their peers and the public as writers on moral and other humanistic questions than they once did. Moderate versions of humanistic interpretation have navigated this difficult terrain by limiting their claims, often focusing on preserving the insights of a single classical author or text. Baehr’s several recent articles on strategies of “unmasking” in the classic authors hint at a higher aim: to identify and improve upon an interpretative strategy in sociology that would offer both social scientific understanding and resources for genuine political emancipation (Baehr 2013*b*; 2013*c*; see also Baehr and Gordon 2012). But thus far at least, Baehr has emphasized textual exposition rather than a constructive moral agenda in these writings.

The account I have given of the status of the classics in the last twenty years casts sociology in a favorable light in key respects. Textbooks very widely agree at least on a small core of the most important contributions to recent feminist theory, poststructuralist theory and critical race theory and have accepted that these approaches deserve inclusion in accounts of the social theoretical tradition. Focused contextualist accounts continue to augment our

understanding of how the classical tradition propagates, collectively making a well-organized contribution to the sociology of knowledge. Baehr's *Founders, Classics, Canons* sharpens standard formulations of "founders" and "classics," which ought to eliminate some of the misunderstandings that have troubled the debate in the past. Positivist and synthetic narratives have apparently lost their appeal for now, but for good conceptual and empirical reasons. Humanist narratives have become more circumspect and thus more supportable.

None of this should be taken to mean, however, that the status of the classics is well understood or secure in sociology. The currently flourishing contextualist and pluralist approaches offer no clear directive as to how we should read the classics, and they still admit disagreement as to why we should care about them in the first place. To further develop the image of pluralism that Levine borrows from Sorokin, we frequently cannot agree on what is a flower and what is a weed. Nor can we agree on how much time and effort must be dedicated to mastering the classical tradition in sociology for practicing scholars. It is true and no paradox that there is widespread agreement in sociology that the classics are important but also widespread ignorance of most of the tradition (especially regarding sociology's prehistory in philosophy) and widespread indifference to how the classics are taught and institutionally preserved. Levine ends his article simply by noting this "ambiguity [in]...the very question of the status of the classic texts as such and why one should wish to continue to attend to them," not offering any definite prescription to solve the problem. I will exercise the same restraint in closing.

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