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## Classic and Canon

The sociological theorists who appear in this book can all be described as classic figures. The fact that they are referred to as ‘sociological theorists’ rather than as ‘social theorists’ is no accident: there is a connection between attitudes to the classics and attitudes to disciplinary boundaries; belief in the continuing relevance of the classics often goes hand-in-hand with belief in the firmness of the boundaries of the discipline of which they are a part. By the same token, doubts about the relevance of the classics are often to be found among those who believe in an interdisciplinary approach to the human sciences.

Here two debates run more or less parallel to one another, the first normative, the second growing out of the history of ideas. In the first debate, arguments in favour of the classics, their status as a source of ideas, categories and vocabulary, what Gianfranco Poggi calls ‘intellectual muscle’ (Poggi, 1996: 43), confronts a series of anti-classical attitudes, ranging from the belief that these works are fatally compromised by the assumptions and working methods peculiar to their context, to the claim that the original object of sociology, society, has ‘disappeared’ (Wagner, 1999; Outhwaite, 2006). In the second debate, it is pointed out that even if we wished to invoke the work of those writing between 1880 and 1920, the period that we regard as the period of classical sociology in continental Europe, we would have to recognise that most of the major sociological statements from that time – with the exception of Durkheim – were made outside the confines of institutionalised sociology; Weber, Simmel, Tönnies and others spoke to a far more wide-ranging audience, and are better thought of as intellectuals whose sociological sensibility co-existed with a daunting erudition in neighbouring fields such as economics, history or law (Andreski, 1972). According to this view, when sociology did become institutionalised it did so in the form of empirical, applied research projects that were tied to various forms of social engineering, and jettisoned the political-philosophical traditions of thought that had defined classical sociology across Europe (Bloom, 1987; Wagner, 1991). Seen in the light of institutional disciplinary history, then, an appeal to the sociological classics looks like a form of nostalgia or antiquarianism, a quest for a glorious but unrecoverable past.

If that was not enough, consider Johan Heilbron’s remark that ‘with the unprecedented expansion of universities after World War II, disciplinary frameworks began to lose much of their function. As of 1960 research increasingly called for approaches that were interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary or

transdisciplinary' (Heilbron, 1995: 4). Just who was doing the calling is a question in itself. By 1976 Wilhelm Baldamus was commenting acerbically on 'the contrast between the administrators' simple-minded trust in interdisciplinary studies and the social scientists' experience of the incommensurability of diverse methods' (Baldamus 1976: 118).

Since Baldamus issued that implicit warning, those seeking to carve out a new domain of inquiry for themselves free of traditional disciplinary constraint have been remarkably successful. Since the advent of area studies in the 1950s and cultural studies in the 1960s, we have witnessed the birth of, among others, women's studies, Victorian studies, Canadian studies, media studies, and post-colonial studies; there is now even something called mobilities research. The characteristic move of each of these is to take a particular substantive area, or problem, and then employ a more or less eclectic set of methods from different disciplines in order to study it. As if in acknowledgement of the tensions and ambiguities at work in such a procedure, there are now university departments that have removed a specific area from their name entirely and called themselves simply 'Interdisciplinary Studies'.

Seen in this light, one reason why discussion of the classics often appears early on in books about sociological theory is that the writer feels the need to reassure the student reader, a reader who is assumed to be resistant to anything written more than ten years ago. The writer making this assumption is often a man in his 40s who is old enough to fear the effects of the generation gap between himself and his students, yet not old enough to be absolved of the responsibility to keep up with the times. Beset by fears about whether his students will find these old books as interesting or important as he does, he feels the need for self-legitimation. Yet the writer should not despair; nor should students be so sure of themselves. The passions of our youth are fleeting, and with age and intellectual experience we come to realise that what we once thought was new and exciting was as tedious as whatever it appeared to have surpassed. Being a student is not simply about negotiating the relationship between one's finger-on-the-pulse attitude to life and the burdensome tasks imposed by one's out-of-touch lecturers; it is about an interplay between one's own sense of what is new and old, what can be discarded and what is worth retaining, and that proposed by others. In any case, no matter when it was written, a book you have not read before is new to thee. So lecturers who are watching films by Lars von Trier or Abbas Kiarostami, or reading Javier Marías while their students are reading Zadie Smith and watching Bruce Willis should not feel old and tired; and students who are reading Jane Austen while their lecturers are reading the latest Murakami should not be so sure of themselves.

The reader is about to discover that the sympathies of this author are broadly with anyone who would rather read Emile Durkheim than Ulrich Beck, Weber rather than Giddens, Gellner rather than Urry. Curiously enough, though, one reason for this is that it is precisely through these older thinkers that one might meet the demand for interdisciplinarity half way; for the classical sociology that some say has been lost and some say should be forgotten was itself forged out of older, already-existing disciplines: Weber is unthinkable without political

science, law, economics and history, Durkheim without political philosophy and law, Marx without political economy and philosophy, Simmel without aesthetics and moral philosophy. Apart from Durkheim, all were at the very least ambivalent about 'society' generations before people started prophesying the 'post-social' (Urry, 1999); perhaps this is what gives their work its range, its massive erudition and a power that far surpasses that of today's stars of the conference circuit (Van Gennep, 1967; Andreski, 1972).

## Sociology Between Literature and Science

The status of the classics in any field is defined by the relationship between them and the works that precede and succeed them. A piece of work is classic if at least some of the ideas it contains transcend the circumstances in which it was produced. Now the way in which the sociological classics live on is peculiar, something we can appreciate if we compare the sociological classics with those in literature, philosophy and the natural sciences. Sociology has been haunted since its inception by all three, so much so that one might even say that the founding sociological classics display a combination of the qualities one is entitled to expect from each: they have the conceptual rigour of philosophy; the sensitivity to human fate and circumstance of the novel; and the natural scientist's insatiable curiosity. Precisely because of this it is not easy to treat the history of sociology in the same way in which we treat the history of literature or art or natural science.

Consider how mechanisms of reception and influence work in literature. Although much work has been done by postmodern literary critics on the ways in which the western canon is the product of continual reinterpretation, the status of Homer or Shakespeare or Dante derives from the fact that, regardless of the extent to which we can contextualise their work and talk about the ways in which it mobilises 'assumptions' about gender or race or sexuality current at the time of its production, the work lives on and speaks to today's reader as directly as it might have done fifty or a hundred years ago. Just what it is that still speaks to us may not be the same today as it was fifty or two hundred years ago, even though the words are the same – a theme brilliantly explored in Borges' story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote' (Borges, 1964a).

The idea that a text might be capable of appealing directly to our vision is not one we immediately associate with the classics of sociology; they seem too closely tied to the times as well as too opaque. Indeed, the gaze of the greatest sociological theorists has always been directed as much at their own times as at eternal verities. This is perhaps the main distinguishing characteristic of the sociological theorist as compared with the poet or philosopher. It would be a second-rank poet or philosopher whose work was primarily rooted in his or her time. Not so the sociologist. Most poets, like most sociologists, are forgotten in the end, but it is more likely that the poet is forgotten because he or she was simply not up to the mark. A sociologist, even one of the first rank, may be forgotten by future generations simply because, while he or she brilliantly

delineated the times, those times are no more. This has been the fate of American sociologists in particular.

If we confine ourselves to the relationship between a writer and his successors, then, the difference between poets and sociologists is clear. It is less clear when one thinks about the relationship between the writer and his predecessors. Whether a writer is a poet or a sociological theorist, they cannot avoid the poetic or intellectual tradition which precedes them. Harold Bloom once argued that the relationship between the poet and his or her past was subject to 'the anxiety of influence' (Bloom, 1973). By this he meant that without the poet's fear that everything he writes might have already been written, nothing genuinely new would be created artistically. Poetic history on this account is made by 'strong poets' whose strength consists in the fact that they are not complete originals – which would after all make them incomprehensible – but who create through a misreading of the work of other strong poets. The effort to distinguish oneself as a poet ends in a kind of failure, but a failure which is heroic to the extent that its effect is the maintenance as well as the modification of a tradition. In similar vein, Sheldon Wolin wrote of the 'epic theorising' of social and political thinkers who have sought to reassemble the world by an act of thought. Such epic theorising is like strong poetry in that it defines itself in relation to previous claims to legitimate knowledge. Nevertheless, such theorising is a political act in a way in which the writing of strong poetry is not, in that the referent of the theory is neither nature nor God nor the human condition but the theorist's own society. If we accept Bloom's account there is no progress in literature, in that the sources for the answers to the questions which literature raises are unlikely to be confined to any one historical period. As Hans Blumenberg puts it:

Homer and Hesiod are our first and, at the same time, most lasting authors of fundamental mythical patterns. Homer is this, if for no other reason than because our literary tradition begins with him. But because he is also one of the greatest members, if not the greatest member, of that tradition, the scandal of the fact that we have to accept something so imposingly mature as its very first item remains concealed from us. (Blumenberg, 1985: 151)

The same may be said of the classics of philosophy. Although philosophy has undergone what philosophers have taken to be fundamental changes of direction, and philosophers have periodically claimed to have brought philosophy itself to an end, as an activity philosophy feeds off an implicit belief that the problems it addresses transcend time. Plato's doctrine of ideas or Aristotle's ethics can be discussed with profit in total disregard for the circumstances in which they were set down; it makes little sense to say that they are outdated. Machiavelli has given us an unforgettable image of the worth, the sheer pleasure, of reading the philosophical classics:

In the evening I return to my house, and go into my study. At the door I take off the clothes I have worn all day, mud spotted and dirty, and put on regal and courtly garments. Thus appropriately clothed, I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men, where, being lovingly received, I feed on the food which alone is mine, and which I

was born for; I am not ashamed to speak with them and ask the reasons for their actions, and they courteously answer me. For four hours I feel no boredom and forget every worry; I do not fear poverty, and death does not terrify me. I give myself over completely to the ancients. (Machiavelli, quoted in Wolin, 2004: 22)

In the natural sciences there is an entirely different relationship between classic figures and their predecessors and successors: their achievements are as imposing as their work is neglected. The work of Newton or Copernicus or Darwin was revolutionary in a way in which the work of no poet or philosopher could be; it both called into question everything that had gone before and achieved such broad acceptance that entire epochs were named after them: we speak readily of a Newtonian universe or the Copernican world or the Darwinian age (unless, of course, we live in some parts of the USA). At the same time, neither the books they wrote nor their basic ideas can be said to hang over or haunt the subsequent development of science. As Thomas Kuhn wrote, everyday science has a routine, non-revolutionary character that consists in problem-solving within a paradigm which, once established, is not easily shaken off. While such a view of the history of science is not without its critics, in the natural sciences there are no classic texts, nothing which, while revered, is likely to be reread, reinterpreted and puzzled over. Even a revolutionary scientific achievement will be the product of repeatable experimental or observational procedures and/or theoretical innovation. The original text which made it all possible can be forgotten or ignored. No natural scientist reads Galileo or Newton or Einstein in order to reinterpret them; that is a task for historians of science.

What, then, of the classics of sociology? When Talcott Parsons famously opened *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937), with the question ‘who now reads Spencer?’, it had an entirely different resonance from ‘who now reads Newton?’. In asking it Parsons did not mean to imply that nobody needed to read the originator of an established method, but that Herbert Spencer’s thought was so deeply rooted in the 19th century that it had been rendered obsolete by the passage of time and by the need for an emergence of new approaches to theorising, a need to be met by Parsons himself. Despite the fact that his own work depended on the work of selected previous thinkers – Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber – even they were appealed to as mere predecessors. If, as Weber said, science is chained to the course of progress, so that every scientist, natural or social, hopes that his work will be surpassed, then Parsons might have claimed to be fulfilling Weber’s hope. The irony was that, in opening Anglo-American sociology to Durkheim and Weber, Parsons made us aware of how much more interesting their work was than his own; and despite his opening line about Spencer’s obsolescence, in 1968 we find Theodor Adorno, the most distinguished representative of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, repeatedly recommending Spencer to a radical generation of German students (Adorno, 2000: 40, 97). All of which suggests that the classics of social science are neither timeless (in the sense of literary classics) nor tied to any discernible course of progress (in the case of the natural sciences), but that they come and go. An awkward and not very

satisfying conclusion, and one that calls for a more refined terminology through which to make sense of their place and significance.

In an important survey Peter Baehr and Mike O'Brien have provided one (Baehr and O'Brien, 1994; Baehr, 2002). Before discussing it we should enter one caveat. While an account of the classics in any field is bound to say that a work is 'classic' if it begins something, established a vocabulary or a framework of understanding, makes possible what was not possible before, in short, provides a founding act, I will suggest later that we can expand the criteria of classicalness to include 'exemplary', and can include under that heading examples of failure as well as success; in other words, there may be, so to speak, 'stand-alone classics', writers who are more admired and loved than influential.

Borrowing from the work of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1970), Baehr and O'Brien distinguish between three kinds of founders:

- founders of *transdiscursivity*, the status of whose work appears to be beyond question
- founders of *science*, who may establish something definitive and lasting
- founders of *discursivity*, who are constantly returned to for a sense of a particular discipline's primary coordinates.

Now discursivity, transdiscursivity and science are useful categories because they cut across the boundaries between disciplines, allowing both for the possibility that different kinds of founders can be located within the same discipline and for disagreements about what kind of founder a particular thinker is.

For example, while Aristotle is a good example of a founder of transdiscursivity, Marx and Freud have been regarded as founders of both discursivity and science. The range of Aristotle scholarship notwithstanding, Aristotelians do share a broad understanding of Aristotle's ideas about ethics and politics, even if they disagree about the prospects for an Aristotelian understanding of human action in the modern world. Marxists and Freudians by contrast may well disagree with one another about Marx's or Freud's basic message, so that their scholarship will be directed as much towards Marx's or Freud's own founding texts as towards the prospects for communism or an improvement in psychic health. The interesting point here is that the parties to the disagreement may both believe that the point of this discursivity is to bring it to an end and to show that Marx or Freud was the founder of a science.

Tensions arise, too, over the status of Durkheim and Weber. Both have been puzzled over by subsequent thinkers, Weber unquestionably more than Durkheim. Though Weber and Marx also appeal to a rhetoric of science, Durkheim saw himself as a founder of a science which might one day possess the dignity of physics, and he is unquestionably less of a founder of discursivity than the other two; there are far more books about Weber's life and work than about Durkheim's, far more efforts to fathom what he is talking about. Weber manages to appear as a founder of science and a founder of discursivity at the same time, with the paradoxes to which this gives rise built into his work from the start. This is partly why he can sound both outdated and indispensable within the course of a few paragraphs. When he is at his clearest he reads like the founder

of a science, and scholars continue to go to *Economy and Society* for definitions of basic terms; but read the two lectures on science and politics as a vocation and the sense of puzzlement can overwhelm you – suddenly he is a founder of discursivity. As a scientist he is, he says, chained to the course of progress, but this means not only that he wants to go beyond his predecessors but also that he wants his work to be surpassed by those who come after him. He says this in 1917, yet we today continue to be fascinated by it; Weber himself thought that he was setting problems for the social sciences that would take a hundred years to address, yet in saying so he knew that he was merely quoting a remark made by Kant more than a century before. Robert Merton has given us an incomparable account of such paradoxes (Merton, 1993).

All of this suggests that to refer to Marx, Durkheim and Weber as the founders of sociology is meaningless in the absence of any sense of the different ways in which they are founders. Writers of textbooks continue to refer to the different traditions which bear their names (Collins, 1994), but the difference is not only one between world views or basic beliefs about society and how it should be studied, but between types of relationship between founder and successors. This is important because it affects the degree of immediacy with which the classics can speak to us and the way in which they are taught and read, so much so that there are different, often conflicting, reasons for doing so. At one end of the spectrum, the point of reading the classics is to debunk them, to show the ways in which they have been agents of or complicit with a system of social or political power or oppression of which we, in the present, do not approve. Some feminist readings of the classics have this flavour (Marshall and Witz, 2004). At the other end, the classics are thought of as a beacon of excellence, the best that we have.

This has generated an unproductive debate that should probably be avoided; to do so we can adopt a broader definition of classic. Allowing for a looseness of terminology you could call it ‘deconstructive’; we will see that some of the most important works of sociological theory are indeed exemplary, not only because they show us how sociology, or sociological theorising, should be done, but because they are examples of heroic striving and failure. Jacques Derrida, often referred to with all seriousness and without a trace of irony as the founder of deconstruction, didn’t quite put matters like this, but in his readings of other thinkers he demonstrated repeatedly how their efforts to write something meaningful, complete, clear and definitive constantly ran up against limits, limits beyond which lay the unacknowledged conditions of possibility of such an enterprise, conditions which, once the author begins to write, he cannot be in a position to take into account. This does not mean that Rousseau or Nietzsche did not know what they were doing, but it does mean that they could never succeed. Derrida at his best demonstrates that, far from being a sign that we should not read them, these shortcomings of even the greatest thinkers represent something deeply human and moving (Derrida, 1997).

The spectacle of failure in itself is not immediately inspiring; what is the enormity of the tasks taken on. Working out the dynamics and direction of world history or the structure of the psyche or the origins of religion or the

roots of the modern world, comparing entire civilisations and belief systems, delineating the lineaments of everyday interaction as they apply to every member of society, constructing a system of categories for the use of all social scientists; all require prodigious feats of learning even from teams of researchers let alone individual scholars. Yet this is what those individuals we call the sociological classics attempted. None of them succeeded and, we may say, the idea that they could have done so makes little sense. How could a single human lifetime be enough to arrive at the answers? The belief that it could is almost a definition of madness (Blumenberg, 1982). All of our heroes were forced to recognise this even as they did not see themselves quite as mere cogs in a machine, or as medieval stonemasons building cathedrals might have seen themselves, contributing to an enterprise they knew would take generations to complete but which would be completed. Their nobility derives from the fact that in refusing the mundane, in placing themselves foursquare before the most difficult questions social science can ask, they avoided egotism and instead devoted themselves to something greater than themselves, and did so with passion and a quest for knowledge, even while having to accept the endlessness of the task. It is this passion without egotism that might make them exemplary for us, both as students and as teachers.

For this reason, the following definition of a classic, from one of their staunchest defenders, is instructive for what it leaves out:

Classics are earlier works of human exploration which are given a privileged status *vis-a-vis* contemporary explorations in the same field. The concept of privileged status means that contemporary practitioners of the discipline in question believe that they can learn as much about their field through understanding this earlier work as they can from the work of their contemporaries. (Alexander, 1989: 9)

Alexander goes on to say that the classic author ‘has established fundamental criteria in his particular field’; yet what may be important about such an author is the failed attempt to make sociology the type of science it can never be, the false claim to have rendered previous endeavours obsolete, the forlorn struggle to provide the sort of definitive conceptual language it can never have, to establish a clear boundary between the language of social science and that of everyday speech. If you want to understand the spirit of this book, you need to set the fine sentiments of Alexander against the more jaundiced view of Reger, the musicologist in Thomas Bernhard’s novel *Old Masters*:

Only when, time and again, we have discovered that there is no such thing as the whole or the perfect are we able to live on. We cannot endure the whole or the perfect. We have to travel to Rome to discover that Saint Peter’s is a tasteless concoction, that Bernini’s altar is an architectural nonsense. We have to see the Pope face to face and personally discover that all in all he is just as helpless and grotesque a person as anyone else in order to bear it. We have to listen to Bach and hear how he fails, listen to Beethoven and hear how he fails, even listen to Mozart and hear how he fails. And we have to deal in the same way with the so-called great philosophers, even if they are our favourite spiritual artists, he said. After all, we do not love Pascal because he is so perfect but because he is fundamentally so helpless, just as we love



Montaigne for his helplessness in lifelong searching and failing to find, and Voltaire for his helplessness. We only love philosophy and the humanities generally because they are absolutely helpless ... One's mind has to be a searching mind, a mind searching for mistakes, for the mistakes of humanity, a mind searching for failure. The human mind is a human mind only when it searches for the mistakes of humanity. (Bernhard, 1989: 19–20)

The classics may well give us much of the grammar without which we would be unable to speak sociologically, unable to take our speech beyond banality, without which we would be like a child or a tourist, able to point at things in the world but unable to say why those things matter. But we need also to appreciate their richness, which means their inconsistencies, paradoxical conclusions and tensions, and their failures, qualities which make them and their authors human.

## How to Recognise a Classic

According to what criteria, then, should a work be counted as a classic? Does a writer have to satisfy all these criteria or only some of them? Baehr and O'Brien suggest three criteria, but I will suggest two more.

The first and most obvious is *intellectual authority*, something implied by the passage from Alexander referred to earlier. Now intellectual authority doesn't come from nowhere, any more than political authority does; we could have a long discussion of how it is established, how certain texts come to be seen to have authority by being surrounded by an apparatus of commentary, and so on. In political theory authority signals a point at which discussion stops, something beyond which there is no appeal. As long as there is authority in politics there is a framework within which struggles for power and position can take place. In this sense, there is an intellectual authority to Durkheim's chapters on solidarity, *conscience collective* and the law in *The Division of Labour in Society*; or in the opening chapters of Marx's *Capital*; or Weber's *Economy and Society*. The conceptual apparatus set down by each of them remained at the heart of sociological theory for decades afterwards, providing a framework, or at least a vocabulary, within which the investigation of more specific or local matters could take place. Of course, questions of sociological theory are not questions of life or death, whereas the collapse of political authority can mean anarchy or civil war. For this reason, if we speak of the founding figures of sociology as having intellectual authority, we can do so in a way that accepts that this authority can be questioned without the discipline collapsing.

The second criterion, suggested by Baehr and O'Brien, is *aesthetic power* (Baehr and O'Brien, 1994, 1994: 65). Given the complexity of the social world, one of the requirements of a theory with pretensions to classic status is that it reduce that complexity, render it manageable and provide the intellectual tools with which this can be done. As Plessner says in the passage we referred to in the introduction, simplification via theory takes many forms, which may not be readily reconcilable with one another. As we will see, despite the differences

between them, Georg Simmel and Theodor Adorno both achieve it by means of the essay, a short, pithy account of a phenomenon considered from more than one angle, and marked by the absence of footnotes or bibliography. Durkheim does it in *Suicide* by reducing the multifaceted phenomenon of suicide to four types, themselves derived entirely from a theory of social order which Durkheim developed independently of the data on which the book was purportedly based; if social order is theorised in terms of social integration and social regulation, considered as sliding scales, then a society can be over-integrated (increased likelihood of altruistic suicide) or under-integrated (increased likelihood of egoistic suicide) over-regulated (increased likelihood of fatalistic suicide) or under-regulated (increased likelihood of anomic suicide) (Durkheim, 1952). Chapter 1 of Weber's *Economy and Society* begins with a simple, fourfold classification of types of action, establishes definitions of a social relationship, and works from there towards progressively more elaborate and large-scale forms of human connection, ending with the state. Baehr and O'Brien refer to the 'austere, sparse beauty' of that chapter (Baehr and O'Brien, 1994: 66), which sounds generous even to Weber's admirers; but if one can be allowed to stretch the meaning of terms a little then there is a sense in which every sociological theorist is a kind of artist, facing a blank canvas and needing to give shape to his perceptions and ours.

The third criterion for a work being considered a classic is obviously, and despite what we have already said, *foundationality*. The philosopher Richard Rorty introduced the term 'foundationalism' into intellectual discourse three decades ago, and since then it has been fashionable to dismiss the search for firm foundations for knowledge as a doomed enterprise, on the grounds that any such attempt is bound to owe much to previous attempts and that the search for new knowledge or the need to improve upon existing knowledge is the lifeblood of inquiry. But in saying this Rorty was also forced to acknowledge that his own intellectual heroes – Heidegger and Wittgenstein in particular – had themselves claimed to have brought philosophy to an end. They didn't want to end it by providing it with foundations which would support all subsequent philosophical activity, but they did want people to stop questing for knowledge in the way they had been doing hitherto (Rorty, 1982).

Marx, Durkheim or Talcott Parsons are all attempting to place social inquiry on firm foundations, but we need to be clear about what we mean by this. Somebody once told me, praising Durkheim's clarity, that he was 'the Descartes of sociology'. But Durkheim's efforts to place sociology on a firm footing bear little resemblance to Descartes' to do the same for philosophy. This is even less true for Marx or Parsons. Their work is better thought of as an example of Wolin's epic theorising (Baehr and O'Brien, 1994: 19), an attempt to rebuild the world in thought using the results of previous attempts as a basis. So Marx is not simply unthinkable without but actively depends on Hegel, he engages in a constant dialogue with him; Durkheim has a similar relationship with Saint-Simon and Comte, as does Parsons with the four theorists who feature in *The Structure of Social Action*. We will see later (Chapter 6) that we can make much of this metaphor of foundations and what is to be built upon them. But

the most important point is that a work can only have pretensions to classic status if the foundations are the basis upon which others, and not only the one who laid them, can build. For instance, Wright Mills implies that Parsons not only never went beyond the foundation stage, but undermined the possibility of building anything by spending much of his career trying to sink the foundations ever deeper and dragging his followers down there with him. The most damning criticism of Parsons is that, for all the voluminous writings, Parsonian social inquiry never begins.

The three criteria mentioned so far – authority, aesthetic power and foundational ambition – are, perhaps, obvious ones to invoke when discussing the capacity of classic text to make a claim on us. But the spirit in which I will discuss these classic authors demands that we add two further criteria, because the three considered so far provide more of a framework for discussing each classic author separately than a means of confronting them with one another.

We can borrow more terminology from Richard Rorty here. Rorty distinguishes between what he calls metaphysical and ironic approaches to the history of ideas (Rorty, 1989). The metaphysician sees the history of philosophy as the history of a series of attempts to grasp the same truth. The assumption here is that if the work of very different thinkers is linked in some way, it is by a common reference point independent of all of them. The ironist, by contrast, believes that there is no truth out there to be grasped, and hence no common project of which these writings can all be said to be a part. They are related to one another, but the relationship is the one they have with each other, not one between each of them and something else beyond them all, like ‘reality’. The history of philosophy for Rorty is best seen as a conversation between these philosophers, one in which, rather than struggling in lonely isolation from one another on the same problems, they ‘feed each other lines’ (Rorty, 1989: 39). The moral of the story for Rorty is that this conversation never stops, even when someone seems to want to bring it to an end; it is also conducted independently of historical context, so that we can imagine a conversation in which one writer’s contribution is met with a reply from someone writing earlier. What I called ‘theoretical liberalism’ might be called ‘theoretical liberal irony’.

The point of this distinction between the ironic and the metaphysical becomes clear when we consider our fourth criterion. In his essay ‘Why read the classics?’, Italo Calvino offers as many as 14 criteria for identifying a work of literature as a classic. However, most of them are variations on a single theme: *inexhaustibility*. He writes: ‘classics are books of which we usually hear people say, “I am rereading”, and never “I am reading”, and every rereading of a classic is as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading’ (Calvino, 2000: 127–8). This means that, while there are many books which are read only once, there are others which contain such richness and depth that they can be returned to repeatedly in the course of a reading life. It may happen that a book we thought wonderful when we were 20 says nothing to us at 30, and the reverse is also true, the book we were forced to read at school becoming a pleasure in adult life; the point is that a text may be called a classic if it seems to contain something new and interesting even though we know we have read it before. We are

never finished with a classic because it is so rich in possibilities that it does not offer itself to us completely on the first occasion, or on any occasion.

Compare this with what happens when you read Brian Tomkins' article on old people and healthcare in Nuneaton, or Diane Ridley's chapter on social relations in a sex change clinic in Brighton in a collection specially commissioned by East Sussex county council. The chances are that, once you have read it and taken your notes, there will be no need to read it again. Ten years later it will seem no more or less interesting and important than it once was. The same things that struck you as significant then will strike you as significant now, and if you were masochistic enough to take another set of notes they would look pretty much the same as they did before. Although Calvino is talking about literature, the point he is making applies to sociology too. *The Communist Manifesto* or Durkheim's *Suicide* or Weber's 'Science as a Vocation' are classics because of the sense of newness and surprise experienced even by a seasoned reader. The newness arises not from our having forgotten what was in them, but because they are able to modify or in some cases confound the image we had already built up of them. The act of rereading them entails, then, a small act of personal transformation, and it is not pushing the point too far to say that in this it is not unlike certain works of art, or that the feeling of newness may be compared to that induced during the act of love when the lover, who one has known for years, appears to one as though for the first time.

In an age of cribs and commentaries this leads to an interesting paradox. The idea of secondary texts, beginners' guides and so on is that they give the student a mediated but also a manageable way in to what are often fiendishly difficult works. Yet the more dependent our understanding of a writer is on such commentaries, the more these second-hand versions of their contents can appear insipid or superficial compared with the original. As long as the commentaries do induce us to go and read the original – and it is an open question today whether they can – we may well find ourselves saying: 'Durkheim is far more interesting than I realised'. For today's student, often without the peace of mind to study for its own sake, pressured into passing exams and therefore fearful of risk-taking, the idea that Durkheim might have postmodern tendencies, or that one of the virtues of the classics is to be disorienting as well as comforting, is not easy to accept. The student of today may feel the pressure to want straight answers, some easy formulas, and if the classics refuse to provide them then they may not be doing their job; but we would do well to take note of a remark by Harold Bloom: '... successful literary works are achieved anxieties, not releases from anxieties' (Bloom, 1995: 38). Because of their scientific pretensions the sociological classics can never be as open-ended as great works of literature and perhaps it is not quite their task to induce anxiety in the sense Bloom intends. Nevertheless, they do not and should not yield themselves easily; as long as they do not, the reading of them will remain a challenging and rewarding experience.

Here it should be admitted that whether they do so yield themselves or induce anxiety may depend upon the circumstances of their reception. Twenty years ago now, Allan Bloom lamented the way in which the work of serious,

brooding and difficult philosophers from the German tradition had been transformed into something safer and altogether more digestible after their importation into America:

A few years ago I chatted with a taxi driver in Atlanta who told me he had just gotten out of prison ... Happily he had undergone 'therapy'. I asked him what kind. He responded: 'All kinds – depth-psychology, transactional analysis, but what I liked best was *Gestalt*' ... What an extraordinary thing it is that high-class talk from what was the peak of Western intellectual life, in Germany, has become as natural as chewing gum on American streets. It indeed had its effect on this taxi driver. He said that he had found his identity and learned to like himself. A generation earlier he would have found god and learned to despise himself as a sinner. (Bloom, 1987: 147)

Textbooks and cribs and other short cuts to understanding increase the likelihood of this sort of thing and as such represent a threat to the classic status of the classics precisely through the way in which they make their content more widely available. To warn of the dangers of this is not to treat the classics as books to be read by members of an exclusive club, but to point to another criterion for identifying a classic.

## Rereading

Classics are works that do not yield themselves on first reading but ask to be reread, on the basis that what they have to say to us in the future may be different from what they can say now. This raises the question of the lenses through which this rereading takes place. Are these lenses formed solely by the commentaries that we have read since the last time we read the originals, by everything that has happened to us in the meantime, or by everything that we have read in the meantime? Will the simple process of getting older and presumably having more experience make us better able to extract new significances from texts, see things that we were previously blind to? And is seeing more, finding more variety, likely to lessen or heighten the anxiety?

This is not a textbook, or at least not an attempt to dispel anxiety by providing you with a short cut to significance. As long as there is no truth about society, or the social world, or history, or the self, or power, as long as the various approaches to sociology both believe that they are getting closer to the truth and know more or less secretly that that truth is unattainable, there can be no definitive reading of the classics. In the face of this, the best we can do is not to provide a grand overview (if such a project was intellectually worthwhile, those with far more talent than the authors of textbooks would have done it) but to play off different classic authors against one another, one set of anxieties against the other, and to try to allow significance to emerge that way. The classics should be reread, then, in the light of other classics; which means that this book is less a textbook than a prod in the back for the student facing towards the library. If this appears to be an esoteric way of going about things, it shouldn't – it is what we all do all the time, as we negotiate the heights and depths of our everyday life.

We know that the truth about how to live will forever elude us, and that nobody's idea of what is significant can definitively triumph over everybody else's. We know this, in our society, even if we have religious convictions; but it does not prevent our leading a life. Nor should the knowledge that no sociological theorist got it right prevent us from identifying ourselves with the intellectual enterprise in which each plays a part.

## The Sociological Canon

Do these writings, taken together, add up to something more than the sum of their parts? Is there a body of works which, if you read them, will turn you into a sociologist? Is there, in other words, a sociological canon?

Most sociologists today, even those who believe that there are books you should read and those you can live without, are suspicious about the idea of a sociological canon. One reason for this is that the idea of the canon has been associated traditionally with Christian apologetics and with the idea of a set of texts held together by clear doctrinal coherence, each of them as necessary as the next. In sociology, by contrast, the obvious and indeed welcome disparity of world-views, which is already a threat to the idea of a sociological canon, is unlikely to be compensated for by a unity of method or procedure. This means that we cannot simply compile for ourselves a list of sociology's essential texts, sit down and read them all and at the end claim to have mastered the discipline. Sociology's criteria of truth and knowledge are more exacting than Christianity's; the truth about society is in many ways far more elusive than the truth about God, so the history of the discipline is not cumulative. It is, instead, a history of problems and questions and recalcitrant difficulty, so much so that there is a fifth criterion for a work being considered a classic in sociology: *a work of sociology may be considered a classic if it presents to us in an exemplary manner one of the important and enduring problems which sociology faces in its battle to make sense of and conceptualise the social.* For all Alexander's claims that an author becomes a classic by establishing 'fundamental criteria in his particular field', no author can control the emergence of new criteria on the part of other classic authors, criteria which then act as standards against which to judge the work of the already established classic. The result of this proliferation of criteria is neither the uncontrolled accumulation of criteria nor progress, in which new criteria simply replace older ones. It is, rather, a process of universal mutual criticism with neither end nor beginning, a perpetual departure from and return to things in which the work of the better thinkers may be examined for their blind spots, inconsistency and one-dimensionality as well as for their integrity, intellectual authority and inspiration. It is a process in which chronology is a minor inconvenience; why not treat Weber as a critic of Adorno or Simmel as a critic of Goffman?

There is another factor which militates against our seeing classic texts as canonical. Sociology, like any other intellectual endeavour, perhaps even like the act of writing itself, is prey to the problems which arise in the course of

any attempt to say something meaningful, to turn an idea into a finished product, a vague set of imaginings into a conceptual apparatus. It is one concerted effort to interpret the world, an effort that, Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach notwithstanding, is not to be sniffed at. It can be broken down into a series of smaller efforts, and that is what we will do here. The point is that in making these efforts, people make moves, formulate propositions, picture the world, use metaphors, make assumptions about the difference between humans and nonhumans, draw diagrams, use two thousand words instead of the three or four that are needed, and use a hundred words where we need twenty thousand. Attending to what happens when they do these things, we may hope to understand something of what we may call the grammar of inquiry. This grammar is perhaps a less sturdy thing than the grammar of a language. But without it, we would not be able to speak. Robert Nisbet once wrote: 'strip from the present-day sociology the perspectives and frameworks provided by men like Weber and Durkheim, and little would be left but lifeless heaps of data and stray hypotheses' (Nisbet, 1967: 5).

There are, then, sociological classics but there is no sociological canon because there is no sociological dogma or sociological faith, even if many of the writers discussed in this book appeared to be in search of something like this. They failed, but this does not mean that their work taken together amounts to nothing more than a few stray hypotheses or a hill of beans; or a pile of bricks waiting to be turned into an edifice. Without them, and the conversation and argument between them, we would be nowhere. It is time that we turned to them.