

IN DEFENCE OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL CANON

A REPLY TO DAVID PARKER

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Nicos Mouzelis. "In Defence of the Sociological Canon: A reply to David Parker",
Sociological Review, May 1997.

Introduction

Before discussing what proposals the author of ‘Why bother with Durkheim?’ has for the sociological canon, let me first state my position on the issue. (The Sociological Review. 45. No. 1: 122-146). I quite sympathize with the David Parker’s contention that very often the Marx-Durkheim-Weber trio is fetishized or divinized their writings being used for promoting various dogmas, for legitimizing in post-hoc fashion conclusions that have been arrived at without serious engagement with the classical texts, as well as for giving a scholarly or theoretical veneer to studies with a predominantly empiricist orientation. I would add to all of this my objection to the recent, geometrically expanding, scholastically oriented Marx-Weber-Durkheim industry, at least in so far as a large input of this literature purports to find out what the ‘Holy Trinity’ have *really* said or meant on one issue or another.

With this last objection I do not want to endorse the opposite extreme: ie the ultra-relativistic argument that the readings of the classics depend so much on our conceptual spectacles that there is no way of being certain that any particular interpretation is nearer the ‘truth’ than another. In this regard I do believe that certain readings can indeed be more accurate or closer to what the three classical sociologists have said or tried to say.

Nevertheless, where recourse is had to the classics, this should be concerned less with the problem of what the three authors ‘really said or meant’, and more with the creative use of the insights and conceptual tools their texts offer us as means for investigating the social world, past and present, in a theoretically relevant and empirically grounded manner. In that respect I consider the writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber indispensable, in the sense that we shall not be able to put them on forgotten library shelves as easily as chemists or physics do with their own classical texts. This is because they inform current research, scholarship and debate as the discussion below makes apparent.

In the light of the above, I now turn to the three main reform proposals that the ‘Why bother with Durkheim?’ paper conveniently summarizes in its concluding section.

On broadening the sociological canon

Here the author proposes ‘*a retrospective enlargement of the entry point into sociology. As the sociological field expands and becomes harder to map, so the gateways into it must multiply*’ (142).

I see no objection whatsoever to the enlargement of the canon provided, of course, that certain criteria of quality are met. These criteria, as far as I am concerned, have nothing to do with the gender; ethnic origins, sexual preferences, or skin colour etc. of the candidates. Neither have they to do with whether their writings promote the values of productivity, democracy, sexual liberation, solidarity, or spiritual emancipation. Following Weber and Parsons, I believe that in a highly differentiated society like ours, the major institutional spheres have their own dynamism, their own logic; and that any attempt to reduce the logic of one sphere to that of another simply leads to various combinations of authoritarianism, barbarism, and obscurantism. Now in so far as those who teach and do research in sociology constitute a relatively autonomous academic community, the logic proper to this community (which Parsons called *cognitive*

rationality) should prevail over neighbouring, competing types of logic, such as that of the market place, of the political party, the church or social movement, etc.

With this for a background I would argue that the canonization of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim was not imposed on the sociological community via some sort of dictatorial edict like the theoretical work of, say, Stalin or Mao was imposed on their societies but rather developed and became established more or less spontaneously as members of the academic community, via long debates and theoretical confrontations, came to realize that the writings of these three thinkers are exceptionally good in two ways:

(a) they offer a set of highly sophisticated and powerful conceptual tools (Generalities II in the convenient Althusserian terminology), useful for raising interesting questions, solving theoretical puzzles, and preparing the ground for more empirically oriented substantive theories (Gen. III)

(b) their conceptual frameworks (Gen. II) as well as their more substantive theories (Gen. III) are superior to other writings in terms of cognitive potency, analytical acuity, power of synthesis, imaginative reach and originality.

When canonization is not imposed on the academic community from the outside by entrepreneurs, politicians, philanthropists, zealots of all sorts etc. when it is the result of an open-ended, communicative interaction among its members then it is perfectly legitimate, because it tends to be based on the criteria (a) and (b) above.

Let me make this clearer by providing examples. If Auguste Comte, the so-called Father of Sociology, did not make it into the 'club', this I think is due to cognitive/intrinsic, rather than political or ideological reasons which are extrinsic to the logic of the academic community. Specifically, Comte used or rather looted historical material in an arbitrary, context-blind manner in order to fill up the boxes of his three-stage developmental model. In that sense, his sociology, despite his constant references to past societies, was profoundly a-historical something which is not at all true about Weber, for instance. Therefore his exclusion from the 'first league' is, I would say, quite justified. Moreover, I would argue that for similarly cognitive/rational reasons the exclusion of other classical theorists such as Pareto, Spencer; Michels, etc. is also perfectly legitimate.

Much the same kind of argument applies to the exclusion of writers whose origins are not Western-European. Focusing on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is a plethora of social scientists in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Russia, for example, whose exclusion has less to do with their ethnic origins than with quality in terms of the (a) and (b) criteria. Of course, the problem of why Western Europe produced more 'fathers' or 'sub-fathers' than, say, South-Eastern Europe is a problem that belongs to the sociology of knowledge. But whatever the explanation (and it is easy to think of several), it certainly has nothing to do with some sort of Western conspiracy of exclusion. The idea that the number of the 'great', if there is no conspiracy, should be equally distributed among constituencies organized along ethnic, gender, racial lines is profoundly unsociological, if not outright absurd. Equally absurd is the argument that if one looks hard enough at such constituencies one will necessarily discover great works that have been ignored because of Western/white/male bias. Discoveries of 'forgotten' works can and do occur from time to time but, once discovered, the canonization of the

candidate into the first, second, or third league should to be genuine be based on criteria intrinsic rather than extrinsic to the academic community.

On the basis of the above, the answer to the author's question why it is only 'dead white males' who have been canonized, and not live or dead blacks, females etc., is quite simple: no persons have yet been found in such constituencies who fulfil criteria (a) and (b). To be specific, I could see the canon being broadened (given changing concerns of the academic community) to include Simmel, Parsons and Foucault, for instance; or, if we concentrate on the living, Giddens, Bourdieu, and Habermas. But I do not at all see why W.E.B. Du Bois or Charlotte Perkins Gilman should be admitted to the club. At least the author has not persuaded me in terms of the (a) and (b) criteria that they ought to be in rather than out. Until I am presented with more convincing arguments, I am bound to assume that his proposal is based less on intrinsic/cognitive and more on extrinsic values. (For those unfamiliar with their names, Du Bois is black and Gilman is a feminist.)

The social construction of the sociological canon

The author's second reform proposal is '*a re-interpretation of the implicit hierarchies underlying choices of Classic authors and canonical texts*' (142).

He correctly points out that sociologists should be more reflexive, that they should apply the constructionist perspective to their own academic sphere as well, and show how certain hierarchies have been created and reproduced in a taken-for-granted manner. This is very well, but the conceptualization of the sociological canon as a symbolic construction tells us nothing for or against its cognitive validity. In view of the fact that everything in social life is symbolically constructed (including, of course, the present fashion of judging canonical texts predominantly in terms of their author's feminist, anti-racist, or anti-imperialist credentials), one cannot avoid the difficult task of justifying choices about the canon in terms of intrinsic criteria such as those mentioned in section 1.

My position raises the question, of whether or not it is possible to identify rational criteria of assessment that cut across the multiplicity of cultural traditions and symbolic micro-worlds that constitute our late modern or postmodern condition. For the relativist, a valid assessment is possible only within but not between such cultural/symbolic worlds. I have no time here to deal with the crucial issue of relativism. I shall simply state my position which, following Gellner and Habermas, argues that due to the considerable overlapping between such worlds, and due to the existence of sociological and evolutionary universals, there are cognitive criteria of assessment that transcend the multiplicity of cultural traditions. This premise can be justified on not only rational but also pragmatic grounds; it is only on the basis of the assumption that such transcultural criteria exist that the social sciences are possible at all.

The sociological canon and social myopia

Parker's third recommendation (142) is

'a re-periodisation of the narrative organising our understanding of sociology to correct the myopic focus on modernity... Should we organise the teaching of sociology so as to accept accounts of globalisation

(Giddens, 1990 and Robertson, 1992) which seem to start the clock of human history as late as the sixteenth century?’

I fail to see how the type of restriction Parker mentions can be linked with Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. How is it possible to maintain that any of these three, or Giddens for that matter, argue or lead one to argue that the clock of history started in the sixteenth century?

Let us take Weber as an example. The ‘uniqueness of the West’ problematic not only does not lead to social myopia and intellectual provicalism but, on the contrary, is an excellent way of sensitizing students to the crucial importance of the comparative method and the need to explore seriously non-Western civilizations and societies not simply so as to understand the West, but in order to understand the extraordinary complexity and multiplicity of the cultural and social universe. It was by means of his comparative analysis which, in terms of breadth of knowledge and originality, no other sociologist has surpassed (and certainly none of the writers the author admires) that Weber tried to explain why the type of revolution that has transformed the globe in the last four centuries first occurred in North-Western Europe and not elsewhere.

What has this thesis got to do with social myopia or provincialism? Whether, following Weber, one considers that the revolution occurred in the West because of certain unique features of Western- European societies (such as, the Protestant ethic, the structure of the European city), or whether one contends that the ‘great transformation’ could have occurred in a number of other advanced, non-Western civilizations (McNeil, 1995) nobody can characterize the ‘uniqueness problem’ as provincial or trivial. Neither can it be maintained that for the three classical sociologists or for Giddens and Robertson history starts in the sixteenth century. If one considers the transition from *Agraria* to *Industria* (to use Gellner’s terminology) as a monumental transformation as monumental as the Neolithic revolution and the transition from pre-agrarian to agrarian societies this does not have to lead to social myopia or an exclusive preoccupation with Western modernity. On the contrary, it is the rejection of this kind of macro-historical, comparative problem by students and teachers nowadays (who are more preoccupied with the sociology of soap operas and less with the sociology of world religions or civilizations) that smacks of provincialism. Let me give a concrete example. In my department, the core course of Comparative Social Structures (which deals with such issues as the social structure of pre-industrial empires, feudal and patrimonial societies, the Indian caste system, Oriental despotism, etc.) has ceased to be compulsory and is experiencing a slow death, simply because it was not popular with students (it did not correspond to the preferences and ‘everyday experiences’ of student constituencies).

Moreover, is it not a gross caricature to say that conventional sociology makes ‘convenient equations’ of civilization, modernization, and westernization? Is the author not aware of Eisenstadt’s work on axial civilizations and empires, of Barrington Moore’s on Western and non-Western routes to modernity, of Michael Mann’s on the relations between power networks in all types of society from those of hunter-gatherers and city-states to empires and modern nation-states? Is the author not aware of Ronald Dore’s writings on the non-Western features of Japanese industrialism, or of the vast literature on the sociology of Asian forms of capitalism and the prediction that they might become hegemonic in the next century? Who has done more to sensitize students to the existence

of non- Western worlds and their importance for understanding our present predicament Du Bois and Oilman, or B. Moore and M. Mann?

And how on earth is it possible to link the neglect of the study of Taoism and Buddhism with the exclusive preoccupation with Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, rather than with the present trendy focus of sociology on popular and for that matter Western culture? How is it possible to blame Marx, Durkheim, and Weber for the growing provincialism of our sociology departments a provincialism which has less to do with the sociological canon and more with the competition of departments to attract middle-class students (black and white, male and female) who do not give a damn about Oriental despotism and the Meiji Revolution and who, as ‘customers’, require the sociology of management, youth culture, or the *film noir* to become the core of their studies?

In the light of the above I would suggest that, in contrast to the author’s point of view, today’s academic provincialism and social myopia are less a result of the exclusive canonization of the classical three ‘dead white males’, and more of the present fashionable tendency to radically break with the sociological tradition that Marx, Durkheim, and Weber have established. This is a tradition that is profoundly universal, focusing as it does on the historically oriented, comparative study of how societies, Western and non- Western, modern and pre-modern, are constituted, reproduced, and transformed. I find that this great tradition is being sadly undermined not because but in spite of the fact that Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are still occupying a prominent place in sociological-theory courses. This undermining is very much part of the transformation of the social-science university into a huge supermarket where students can pick and choose subjects which, as Parker puts it, are compatible with their own experiences. Although it has been the prevailing neo-liberal ideology that has played the central role in bringing about this crass commercialization of academia, intellectual trends within the university have contributed to it in their own way (Lasch, 1995).

To conclude this section, contrary to what Parker may think, I believe that the social myopia and provincialism of the present have to do less with the exclusive canonization of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, than with the monologic type of ‘rationalization/modernization’ of the British higher-education system. This is a rationalization that tends systematically to subordinate the academic ethos to the managerial one (Mouzelis, 1992).

Sociological theory and the feminist perspective

Finally a few words about the way in which Parker deals explicitly with my position on sociological theory in general, and on its relation to feminist theory in particular.

As in the rest of his paper, Parker does not state directly what he thinks about a specific issue, but chooses a ‘safer’, indirect route instead; this consists of using, or rather misusing, the work of others in a way not dissimilar to how some sociologists use classical texts ‘decoratively’ so as to legitimize their own point of view. More specifically, the author chooses quotations from Gregor Maclennan’s article (1995) in a way that caricatures not only my own position on feminism and sociological theory, but also Maclennan’s interesting and, on the whole positive, critique of my works. It is also significant that the author does not refer to my reply (Mouzelis 1996) to Maclennan’s critique, which made my position on the relevant issues crystal-clear.

Concerning feminism and its relationship to sociological theory, I have basically made two points:

First, that as far as contemporary sociological theory is concerned (which I define in a restrictive manner as a specialized subfield of sociology that focuses on the production of conceptual tools useful for the generation of empirically oriented theories in various substantive fields, such as the sociology of knowledge, gender; religion, culture, etc.), it is very difficult, if not impossible to label the work of major theorists as either feminist or anti-feminist. To take Giddens' work, for instance (not his more substantive studies, but his attempt to build a general conceptual framework as in *The Constitution of Society*, for example), his basic concepts are, quite rightly, gender neutral. Whether one looks at such basic notions as duality of structure, social system, structuration, the knowledgeable subject, etc., or whether one considers how these concepts interrelate and form a coherent whole in both instances feminist considerations are irrelevant. They are irrelevant because the *Constitution of Society* focuses, in highly abstract manner, on the way that human beings (male and female, black and white, homosexuals and heterosexuals) use symbolic codes/languages for the purpose of interacting with each other and, in doing so, reproduce such languages/codes. This being the case, Giddens' structuration theory can be used by both feminists and anti-feminists in their ideological or non-ideological debates. Exactly the same point can be made about, inter alia, Bourdieu's theory of the habitus (1977, 1990), Elias' figurational sociology (1978), or Alexander's notion of multi-dimensionality (1982). If in the substantive writings of some of the above authors one can discover anti-feminist elements, I would submit that this is not logically or necessarily linked with their overall conceptual framework. To repeat: their basic conceptualizations (Gen. II) on the level of sociological theory proper are gender-neutral, and rightly so. The insistence of some feminists on splitting all sociologies and all sociologists into a feminist and anti-feminist camp is as absurd as were the Marxist attempts in the 1960s to impose a similar manichean division between Marxist and bourgeois social scientists (this leading, in turn, to a facile rejection of 'bourgeois' works on purely ideological grounds).

My second point about feminism and sociological theory is that feminism has been profoundly influenced by various theoretical trends such as phenomenology, social constructivism and poststructuralism; and that, overall, the influence was from sociological theory (in the restrictive sense of the term) to feminism, rather than the other way round. In fact, I cannot think of any theoretical breakthroughs (on the level of Gen. II) in the last three decades that were due to developments in feminist studies. To put it plainly, it is easy to show how feminist writers have been influenced by Foucault, Lacan, Habermas, Giddens; it is much more difficult to show how the latter, on the level of Gen. II, have been influenced by the former. This is true, of course, not only with regard to feminism, but also concerning many other substantive subdisciplines of sociology.

The above does not deny that women's studies have made 'serious contributions to our knowledge of gender as well as to substantive areas of sociology that were previously studied in a gender-blind manner' (Mouzelis, 1996: 132). Neither does it deny that, unlike other subfields of sociology, work in the sociology of gender tends to be not only empirically but also theoretically grounded. Finally, I have never argued, as the author of 'Why bother with Durkheim'?' wrongly suggests, that sociology (rather than sociological theory) hasn't been greatly influenced by feminist, cultural, or ethnic studies.

On the contrary, I think that developments in these fields have influenced sociology greatly, and radically changed the curriculum in sociology departments. Aside from the ideological zealotry that characterizes some writings in these fields (particularly in the USA), I consider their overall contribution extremely important. At the same time I think that women's studies, the sociology of race, ethnicity, and cultural studies are no longer peripheral topics in sociology departments. They tend increasingly to occupy a central position, and in doing so displace other areas of study which, by non-market criteria, are equally if not more important.

In conclusion, if the type of curriculum reform advocated by 'Why bother with Durkheim?' based as it is on a combination of market populism, Californian hype and New England puritanism were rigorously implemented, it would make sociology teaching not less but more problematic on grounds which are, at best, somewhat questionable.

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