The heritage of classical sociology

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Abstract
This short contribution explores alternative conceptions of classical sociology and continuities and discontinuities in its history, with particular attention to the German and Austrian context and the sociological diaspora resulting from European fascism.

Keywords
Continuity, diaspora, polarisation, ideology

Taking the year of Max Weber’s death in 1920 as a cut-off point provides a parsimonious conception of classical sociology. I have recently suggested in more detail elsewhere (Outhwaite, 2020) that much of what was produced in sociology, and more broadly, social theory in the following decades drew heavily on the work done at the turn of the 20th century and in its first two decades.1 The continuity is perhaps clearest in France, where the Durkheimian succession persisted for decades and inspired substantial work in history and other fields. (The spread of sociology outside the profession is an important aspect of this question.)

In Britain, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) enjoyed a significant after-life in a wide range of areas, even when he was taken as a negative reference-point. In the US, Parsons (1937) quoted Crane Brinton’s remark ‘Who now reads Spencer?’ but found himself later exploring ‘evolutionary perspectives’ (Parsons, 1966), and at the beginning of this century Runciman (2009) and others revived evolutionary theory. In the related area of the philosophy of history, which had been an important source of earlier sociology, especially in Germany (Barth, 1897), R.G. Collingwood, Michael Oakeshott and others looked back to 19th-century Hegelian and other traditions which had been effaced in the 1920s by analytic philosophy.

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In Germany and Austria the political break with the past around 1920 was particularly sharp and the discontinuities in the social and intellectual configuration of the social sciences were more obvious. There was a substantial generational shift among sociologists, with Alfred Weber’s generation of those born around the middle of the previous century, the generation of Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) and Werner Sombart (1863–1941), replenished by a new generation from the later part of the century, the ‘war generation’ (Peukert, 1991: 16): figures such as Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Hans Freyer (1887–1969), Emil Lederer (1882–1939) and Alfred Schütz in Austria (1899–1959). Käsler (1984: 43) provides a fuller list of names for the period 1909–1934, with a ‘core’ made up of Oppenheimer, Sombart, Tönnies, Max Weber and von Wiese, an ‘inner circle’ including Max Adler, Hans Freyer, Hans Kelsen, Mannheim, Scheler, Simmel, Spann, Troeltsch, Alfred Vierkandt and Alfred Weber, an ‘outer circle’ including Carl Grünberg, the founding Director of the Institut für Sozialforschung, and Robert Michels, as well as a number of less socialist-inclined figures, and, on the ‘periphery’, Theodor Geiger, Max Horkheimer and a number of others.

There were however strong continuities in several areas of social theory. Marxism mutated into neomarxism, with Lukács (1923), Korsch (1923) and the later emergence of Frankfurt critical theory in the early 1930s. Weber’s interpretive sociology was radicalised by Schütz (1932) in his first major work, and the sociology of knowledge, inaugurated by a largely forgotten figure, Wilhelm Jerusalem (1854-1923), was consolidated by Mannheim and Scheler. It was in fact Jerusalem who formulated the idea of what he called soziale Verdichtung (social condensation), the gradual reinforcement of beliefs and memories. (Huebner, 2013: 436). This anticipated the idea of the social construction of reality, formulated by Berger and Luckmann (1966), which in turn really took off much later with the vogue of postmodernism and was reinvented by Searle (1995). ‘Reinventing the wheel’ is a frequent phenomenon in sociology and related areas: a theory is reinvented or rediscovered after a significant lapse of time.

In a book focussed mainly on the interwar period, Harrington (2016: 2) puts this in a longer time-frame: ‘by the close of the 19th century through to the revolutionary years of the Weimar Republic, intellectual life in Germany sees the genesis of movements with an unparalleled alertness to facts of the relativity, contingency and fragility of knowledge-claims in European world-pictures’. Ringer (1969: 240) had also remarked: ‘It has always struck me as particularly interesting that so many of the great debunking analysts of modern culture have been German or Austrian, not English or French’. Harrington has convincingly argued that Ringer, Habermas (1987, 1991), Lepenies (2006) and others have overstated the pathologies of Weimar’s intellectual political culture, but as Karl Mannheim brilliantly documented in Das konservative Denken (Mannheim 1927) and Ideologie und Utopie (Mannheim 1929a), social polarisation is conducive to totalising explanations of ideology and other social processes.

Mannheim (1929b) argued that the institutional recognition of sociology in the 1920s was a belated response to the achievements of the previous generation, and in particular to the work of ‘Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch and Max Scheler (to name here only those already dead).’ This work, taken as a whole, ‘surpasses at a stroke the level of Western sociology’ and provides a legacy to be developed further. Mannheim (1929b: 433, n.3) stressed in a footnote his own indebtedness to these figures. Lukács also saw himself as developing an approach originating with Marx and Hegel, taken together rather than (or
as well as) in opposition to one another, which was later strikingly illustrated in the discovery of Marx’s Paris Manuscripts of 1844; this also inspired Frankfurt critical theory. There was a continuity even in Russia, between pre-revolutionary Marxism and its establishment in politically reinforced prominence after 1917, although other sociologists such as Sorokin (1889–1968) were eventually forced to leave – in Sorokin’s case in 1922.

These continuities suggest that it does not matter much whether we set the end of the ‘classical’ period in 1920 or, say, around 1968, as in the practice of this journal. The later date saw a very substantial revival of classical sociology, especially in countries like the US and UK, with other sociologists, including eventually Simmel, riding on the tails of Marx’s coat. Steven Lukes’ book on Durkheim (Lukes, 1973) was one of the iconic representatives of this rediscovery of the classics. While the Weber and Durkheim industries developed independently of each other, there were also synthetic moves by Giddens (1971) and others to bring out their interrelations. A diverse Western Marxism blended with system theory, emerging out of the functionalism of the 1920s, both in West Germany and in North America, and later with the economistic approach of rational choice theory.

**Belatedness and catching up in social theory**

Whereas Durkheim’s reputation was established at an early stage in his career, in all three cases in or coming from the German language area, as with Nietzsche a generation earlier, their main impact was not felt until near the end of their leading protagonists’ lives (1947 for Mannheim, 1959 for Schütz and 1971 for Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* was not translated until 1959 into French and 1971 into English). There was a similar lag in the reputation of the historical sociologist and theorist of ‘figurational sociology’, Norbert Elias (1897–1990), who had been Mannheim’s assistant in Frankfurt and whose importance was only properly recognised after the publication in English in 1969 of the first volume of his major work, *The Civilising Process*, which had first been published in 1939. Elias’s longevity enabled him to enjoy two decades of prominence after his retirement from Leicester University in 1962.

**Classics and epigones?**

All this suggests some conclusions about the temporalities of social theory. In the mid-20th century, the dominant features were the delay caused by the War and, much more importantly, the contribution of the intellectual diaspora from fascist Europe (Fleck, 2011). Max Weber notoriously saw his generation as one of epigones and it has been argued that this is also true of the generation which came to prominence after his death. What, we may ask, would have happened to European sociology in the absence of the twin catastrophes of 1933 in Germany and 1938 in Austria and Czechoslovakia? One of the boldest suggestions was that made by Lepenies (1988: 320–321), following Käsler (1981: 230) and König (1971) ‘Looking back on the 1920s and the early years of the 1930s, we cannot today be in any doubt that with Karl Mannheim there opened up in Germany the hope of a new orientation and stabilisation for sociology that was brought to nothing by the victory of National Socialism’.
Even in England, Mannheim was beginning to have quite an impact on intellectual life by the time of his early death (Lepenies, 1988: 328–333). For Käsler (1984: 41–42), the importance of Mannheim was that, like Max Weber, he represented a ‘specifically social scientific sociology’ in the face of a polarisation of German sociology between a natural scientific model on the one hand, and a culturalistic approach on the other. . .’ Käsler (1984: 12) argued that German sociology, though institutionally quite robust, suffered from a ‘search for respectability’ which meant that the response of its leading representatives to the rise to power of national socialism was ‘theoretical and practical hopelessness or even susceptibility’. One must probably also recognise that the Weimar period did not produce any work of comparable importance to that of the previous generation, though I think that Schelsky (1959) and Gerhardt (2001) are rather too negative. Schelsky (1959: 37) notoriously claimed that by 1933 the main themes of German sociology were already played out, while skating over his own role as an active Nazi (see Kruse, 1994; Rehberg, 2000). Gerhardt (2001: 394), in a later generation, also argues that ‘The decline of sociological reflection in the Weimar period – compared with the life work of Simmel and Weber – was evident’. Dahme and Rammstedt (1984), by contrast, merely accentuate the positive legacy of the German and French classics.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Max Weber was somewhat suspect among Western Marxists, as historical accounts demonstrated that he was more of a German nationalist than the benevolent liberal portrayed in North America; I remember a chalked slogan on the wall of Balliol College in Oxford, reading ‘Max Weber was a fink’. After 1989, with Marxism somewhat eclipsed and nationalism becoming more prominent, Weber again seemed less old-fashioned and more relevant and the interface with Marx a more obvious focus, whether in Frankfurt critical theory or in earlier accounts such as Lowith’s classic essay of 1932 on Weber and Marx, which Tom Bottomore and I had published in translation in 1982.

The ‘cultural turn’ in Western sociology also brought out the fundamental contribution of Georg Simmel who, apart from some stylistic anachronisms, could have passed for a contemporary contributor to journals like Theory, Culture and Society, founded in the UK in 1982. Bottomore began a translation of Simmel’s 1900 Philosophy of Money which was completed by David Frisby, who did most to bring Simmel, with his multiple focus on sociology, moral philosophy and the philosophy of history, into the English-speaking world. Gramsci, too, was incorporated into this concern with the politics of culture and the cultural and ideological shaping of politics, inspiring contemporary work by Stuart Hall and others.

This broadening out of sociology in the later 20th century had two key aspects. One, which I have stressed here, is the reconceptualisation of sociological theory not as the theory of one social science among others but as something closer to political theory, incorporating normative concerns in something more like theory *sans phrase* – the sort of theory which one might find in the bookshops of major cultural institutions along with books on art and cinema, with Lacan and Levinas adjacent to Latour and Lefebvre (but probably not Luhmann, even in Germany). The second way in which sociology, including classical sociology, has informed public consciousness is in a greater awareness of the need for a holistic approach to social, political, economic and cultural processes – as well as to natural processes refracted through the sociology of scientific knowledge. Sociology is no longer identified with the clip-board but reincorporated into something
like the place which it occupied in the classical period, interacting with sociologically informed history (in Germany Gesellschaftsgeschichte) and a style of philosophy open to interdisciplinary engagements.\(^6\)

Running counter to these developments, however, is the expansion of political science and some currents of International Relations with a much more limited range of reference. While some IR scholars see themselves as engaged in international sociology and drawing on classical sociology, others have a narrower focus, limited to the emergence of IR as a discipline in the aftermath of World War I and again after 1945. In political science, similarly, the expansion of programmes in public policy tends to colonise areas of social policy addressed by sociologists, and cultural studies and media studies have to a considerable extent emerged out of sociology.

Writing in a pandemic which echoes that of 1918, it is tempting to think in hundred-year cycles. The apparent exhaustion of social democracy across Europe and the current conflict between nationalism and more cosmopolitan perspectives are phenomena which Max Weber or the early Frankfurt theorists would find familiar. We again have something like fascism in many parts of the world, if not ‘classical’ Fascism in its 1920s form. The future of democracy is perhaps more insecure than at any time since the late 1940s (Crewe and Sanders, 2020; Mackert et al., 2021; Schäfer and Zürn, 2021). More positively, we have seen in the past century a fundamental secularisation and modernisation process which is surely irreversible in the long term; it is unthinkable, for example, that the British Conservatives would reintroduce their ‘Section 28’ ban in the late 1980s on the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality in schools and colleges. In thinking about the future of the humanities and social sciences, however, the generation of the early sociologists still has much to teach us.

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1. I would not go as far as Halsey (2004: 5) who suggested that, at least in Britain, ‘. . .social ideas and sociological explanations scarcely altered between 1900 and 2000’. On the relation between social theory and sociological theory (see, e.g. Outhwaite, 2015: 3–7). On national traditions in sociology see Wagner, 2004.
2. Both editions of Barth’s book were reviewed in the US by Small (1898, 1915).
3. On the earlier generational divide in the early 1870s see Turner, 1986: 3–5.
4. See also Eilenberger, 2018.
5. Mannheim (1929b), ‘Zur Problematik der Soziologie in Deutschland’, Translated in K. H. Wolff (ed.), *From Karl Mannheim. New York: Oxford University Press*, 1971.
6. See, for example, Meacham and de Warren (2021). Käsler (2000: 11) also draws a parallel with the early 20th century.
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