Introduction

In the previous chapter the issue surrounding the role of classic text in academic life was set out. Although the full picture is more complicated, two broad outlooks were identified between those critics who are hostile to the idea of a canon of classics and advocates who defend its continuing value. In the latter part of the chapter, attention moved to some of the specific criticisms levelled at the sociological canon, and an initial defence of it was presented. There is though, a wider context to the dispute, both societal and sociological, and before moving on to a more extended discussion of the character of classics and canons, I want to explore this context. The nature of the dispute reflects the developing identity of the discipline as one that at various times and in various ways has produced, accepted, or denounced its classics according to the way it understands itself as a discipline. An important related theme throughout this section is the way sociology tends to diminish the significance of the past, underestimate the importance of tradition, and thereby skew the way it conceives its classics. The classic, I shall argue, links the past and the present; it discloses how much we share with the past, and how much it continues in us.
The section is made up of four chapters. In the first, Chap. 3, some of the parameters that informed the early identity of sociology are sketched out and the manner in which these fed into two different conceptions of the discipline is explored. These two conceptions, the scientific and the humanistic, produced different views of the role of the classic. Where the scientific model eliminated the need for sociology to have classic texts, the humanistic model initially saw them as sources of illumination, though it has subsequently come to regard them in a more negative light.

In Chap. 4, ‘On the Antipathy of Sociology to the Past’, the focus is on the way some of the discipline’s basic axioms have prevented it from appreciating the value of tradition and more generally of conceptualising the past. I shall argue that tradition is the ground of the classic text and that antipathy towards it necessarily hinders an appreciation of the classic. This idea is amplified by showing that sociology not only has a blind spot when it comes to recognising the productiveness of tradition, it frequently finds it repressive.

The role of postmodernist ideas is considered in Chap. 5 in terms of the way they also undermine traditional assumptions about society and thereby about sociology and its classic texts. It is suggested that postmodernist accounts of society are far from unproblematic as are their corresponding judgements about the necessary dissolution of sociology.

In response to the three previous chapters, Chap. 6 affirms the importance of tradition both for sociology as a whole and the value of its classics in particular. The limits of the de-traditionalisation thesis are explored and found wanting and set in contrast to the importance of traditionality to social life. This rethinking of tradition is linked to ‘habit’ as feature of human behaviour and is similarly rethought along positive lines. Both concepts are propaedeutic to an understanding of the classic text.

Volatile Identities, Unresolved Crises

The dispute over sociology’s classics echoes an older crisis over the identity of the discipline. In many ways, since its inception, the nature of sociology has been diverse and its identity contentious. It has often sought coherence, but rarely found it. If one takes Comte’s work from the 1830s...
as one starting point, it is indicative of the problem that he assigned the discipline the unenviable task of wresting order out of chaos. Sociology, he averred, would ‘stem the “deep and widespread anarchy of the whole intellectual system”’ (cited in Camic and Joas (Eds.) 2004: 1) and in doing this, ‘social physics’ (or sociology) would be set at the pinnacle of the sciences. While this sounds absurd today, there was a rationale to the claim. As part of his stage-theory of human development, sociology in the modern world, he claimed, would be able to provide ‘positive’, as opposed to ‘theological’ or ‘metaphysical’, knowledge of the social whole in which other disciplines worked and would thus play a key role in furthering human progress.

From another angle and writing a history of British sociology, Phillip Abrams (1968: 3) noted that the founders of the Sociological Society of London, which was the first national sociological association in Europe, were far from being a singular group of people with one thing in mind. The society was made up ‘of historians and philosophers, biologists, journalists, politicians and clergymen, town planners, geographers and businessmen’, and could boast as a founder no less a literary figure than H.G. Wells. Unsurprisingly the camp was divided over what sociology was. Wells came to oppose the scientific aspirations of his fellow founders and Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. The Webbs had also been founders of the London School of Economics in 1893, so when Wells lectured there in 1906 on ‘The So-Called Science of Sociology’, early signs of the now familiar rift between a scientific and a humanistic version of the discipline came sharply into focus.1 Wells derided as pretentious the scientific claims of earlier writers such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, declaring them ‘idols’, arguing that any mathematical modelling, counting, or classifying would only lead to error. In almost Hegelian fashion, he wrote that because the human world was always in the process of becoming, we could not therefore

…put humanity into a museum, or dry it for examination; our one single, still living specimen is all history, anthropology, and the fluctuating world

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1 For an excellent discussion of Wells’ relation both to the Webbs and sociology, see Lepenies 1988: 143–154.
of men. There is no satisfactory means of dividing it and nothing else in the real world with which to compare it. (Wells: 1907: 364)

Truth in the social world, Wells believed, could only be grasped through an understanding of the uniqueness of individuals. Insofar as scientific sociology failed to do this, it would not succeed. In fact, he claimed that an early sign of failure was already apparent as no one could agree exactly what sociology was. In the Sociological Papers that emerged from the Society’s early activities, the three volumes for 1905–1907 produced sixty-one different definitions of the nature and aims of the discipline (Abrams 1968: 3).

It is tempting to dismiss Wells’ rhetoric recommending sociology relinquish its scientific aspirations for something more literary as only the partisan preferences of a well-known novelist. Yet if one situates sociology in the broader context of nineteenth century thought his views were not uncommon, but represented one side of a long-standing and contentious debate that continued well into the twentieth century. Both Literature and Sociology laid claim to hold the key to a proper understanding of modernity (Lepenies 1988). Both focused on common issues such as the sense of dislocation, alienation, and anomie produced by the industrial revolution and the concomitant growth in the importance of the ‘cash-nexus’ as that ‘omnipresent substitution of money for personal relations’ (Mazlish 1989: ix). Indeed, though the concept of the ‘cash-nexus’ is known in sociology through Marx’s work, notably the Communist Manifesto, the term was originally coined by Thomas Carlyle in his Past and Present (1843). Moreover, for all that, he was a man of letters, Wells expected his proposal to find adherents amongst sociologists, for his aim was not merely to create a literary sociology, but to link the subjective and objective, beauty and truth, and produce a discipline that was neither art in the traditional sense nor science in the narrow sense. In effect, he was mooting a third cultural order beyond the humanities and the natural sciences, albeit one that drew on elements of both.

Wolf Lepenies (1988) and Bruce Mazlish (1989) in their respective histories of sociology suggest that the social sciences, whether they realise it or not, have in fact created a third culture. Indeed, the original German title of Lepenies’ Between Literature and Science was Die Drei
Kulturen (The Third Culture). For his part, Mazlish notes in relation to C.P. Snow’s (1959) famous distinction between the culture of sciences and of the humanities, that ‘anyone who has thought about the “Two Cultures” becomes increasingly aware that there are really at least three cultures: humanities, natural sciences and social sciences’ (Mazlish 1989: ix, see also Horowitz 1994: 240–252). Interestingly, the ambition of developing an alternative ‘third’ identity for sociology, one that owes something to the knowledge ‘interests’ of each culture but everything to neither, was given a powerful theoretical push more than sixty years after Wells’ paper, in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1966, 1971). A reconstructed Critical Theory (sociology), Habermas argued at the time, must overcome the limitations imposed on it by being aligned entirely with one camp or the other. He maintained that because sociology dealt with matters that were both factual and normative, it should link elements of the hermeneutic disciplines (the humanities) with their ‘interest’ in meaning to the empirical-analytic (natural science) disciplines with their ‘interest’ in causal connections. Out of this mixture a new critical sociology would emerge with an ‘interest’ in emancipation.\(^2\)

Notwithstanding the possibility that sociology might express a third culture with its own distinctive properties, the actual history of the discipline has almost invariably involved being pulled to and fro by forces at odds with each other. In the 1890s, Durkheim was the key figure in the founding of French sociology, both discursively and institutionally.\(^3\) Like Wells, he was critical of Comte and Spencer, but unlike Wells, not in order to deny the possibility of a scientific sociology; his aim though

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\(^2\)While Habermas has retained his belief in the importance of sociology being both scientifically and hermeneutically adequate, by the early 1970s he recognised that ‘emancipation’ did not follow straightforwardly from conjoining the two in a ‘hermeneutically informed functionalism’.

\(^3\)Baehr (2002: Chapters, 1–2) makes this seemingly obvious but often overlooked distinction between the discursive founders of sociology who established the intellectual shape of the discipline, and its institutional founders. The latter were responsible for the institutional development of the discipline by establishing university departments or academic journals of sociology. As founder of the Anée sociologique and as a founder of the intellectual tradition that bears his name, Durkheim was one of the few who managed to straddle both categories (Baehr 2002: 6–7). It is an important distinction as debate in this area often lacks clarity over exactly what the object of debate is, that is, who founded the discipline. It is a distinction that bears on my later discussion of classics and canons. In this, I shall argue that canons are the products of the institutional life of university education, whereas classics are matters of evaluation and their status invariably open to debate.
was to establish his own version of it. The injunction in *The Rules of Sociological Method* to treat social facts as if they were things had a scientific intent, but did not mean that social reality was a continuation of the natural world. A social phenomenon was not a variety of biological phenomena, nor was the study of society a branch of Darwinian natural history, as Comte and Spencer implied. Societies may exhibit some evolutionary properties in terms of the division of labour, but the ‘social’ was a domain which existed in its own right. It was characterised by its own emergent processes and law-like properties; it existed *sui generis*. Sociological science was to be distinguished from other sciences, including biology, by virtue of the uniqueness of its ‘object’: social facts. Like Comte and Spencer, Durkheim sought to unify the discipline, but by placing his ideas in opposition to theirs.

In the growing cultural split between science and literature, sociology in France and England predominantly sought to establish its credentials by drawing on the kudos of science, though not from a singular conception of it. In Germany, the picture was different again, where another complex of ideas characterised the emergence of the discipline. The natural sciences had grown extensively in the nineteenth century but Germany also had a strong culturally embedded tradition of the *geisteswissenschaften*. These ‘human’ or ‘moral’ sciences emphasised the importance of *geist* or human ‘spirit’ as that unique quality possessed by human beings enabling them to be the creators of their own world through history. In the 1880s and 1890s, advocates of the distinctiveness of these sciences of ‘spirit’, such as Windleband and Rickert, sought to mark them off clearly from the natural sciences by distinguishing the inherent goals of one from the other. The telos of natural science lay in its ‘nomothetic’ intention of discovering general laws, while the aim of the human sciences was the ‘ideographic’ one of interpreting the uniqueness of particular events and people as expressions of human values. The force of these ‘interpretative’ ideas entered sociology through the work of Weber and Simmel,⁴ who are usually seen as the first codifiers of the

⁴The status of Simmel as a classic founder of sociology is much less clear-cut than Weber’s status, and is a more recent development. Levine (1981: 61) remarks that in the mid-1950s, when he was completing his doctoral research on Simmel, the latter was ‘widely regarded as an archaic amateur’. His failure was twofold. On the one hand ‘the only sociological knowledge worth having was pro-
discipline in Germany, equivalent to, if quite different from, Durkheim in France. It has been argued that rather than Weber and Simmel being the key intellectual founders of German sociology, greater significance should be credited to the work of Wilhelm Dilthey as he was the intellectual precursor of Simmel and Weber and the great ‘codifier and spokesman for… [that]…national tradition of social thought’ (Levine 1995: 194). Whatever importance we attribute to particular authors though, the impact of this tradition has remained considerable. Its ideas as they appear in interpretive sociology have gone through numerous changes in the last hundred years. However, debates over these issues and the effect they have on the identity of the discipline have not subsided but only provided an alternative vision.

There was no greater settling of differences in the USA than in Europe. American sociologists adapted European ideas to suit their emerging university system and immediately put forward their own syntheses for a unified sociology in competition to European schemes, and in competition with each other (Camic and Joas 2004: 2). As with emerging traditions in Britain and France, evolutionary theories offered American sociology the prospect finding common ground under the broader umbrella of a ‘unified science’. Both William Sumner and Lester Ward drew on the social evolutionist ideas of Spencer, but reached different conclusions. Sumner connected evolutionary progress to social-Darwinist assumptions about the virtues of the free-market and minimal state interference. The implication was that not only would it be the fittest societies that survived; the most evolutionarily advanced societies would also naturally be the most successful. On the other hand the determinism implicit in Sumner’s naturalistic account was not accepted by Ward. If science gave us control over nature, Ward maintained, it was contradictory to surrender human affairs to the laws of nature. As intelligence was part of our biological inheritance, a focus on human achievement was seen by him as the proper subject matter of sociology (Collins 2007: 4–8).

duced by applying rigorous empirical procedures’, with Simmel ‘far too un-empirical to be taken seriously’. On the other hand, ‘the much smaller number who struggled to pursue theoretical questions in sociology found Simmel’s habit of thinking too playful, whimsical almost, and rejected him as a serious theorist’.
Despite the hope that a unified ‘science of society’ could be founded in the USA, no single paradigm emerged. Indeed, though American sociology had developed institutionally to a much higher level than in Britain,\(^5\) by 1932 it showed the same resistance to disciplinary definition that characterised the British case in 1907. In a survey of forty universities, thirty-eight of which taught sociology, 803 separate courses were being offered, with only 4 of them common to nine institutions (Collins 2007: ix). A coherent identity may have been the goal, but a patchwork quilt of competing ideas actually characterised the discipline from the late nineteenth, through the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, with the partial exception of the structural-functionalist synthesis wrought by Parsons in the 1930s and 1940s and which came to prominence in the 1950s,\(^6\) the pattern has remained the same. While the circumstances underlying the early development of sociology have changed, the same centrifugal forces have, if anything, intensified since the Second World War, bringing no solace to those who see value in at least some minimal disciplinary cohesion. The effect of this fragmentation has been to produce an intermittent but regular sense of unease over the identity of the discipline, prompting Robert Merton (1976: 21) to declare that ‘Sociology has been in a condition of crisis throughout its history’ (1976: 21). It is an idea reiterated more gloomily by Jeffrey Alexander in the late 1990s, when he noted that where once there was optimism that cumulative progress was being made, it has been replaced by scepticism where ‘words like malaise, pessimism, disintegration, and disillusionment increasingly color discourse about contemporary sociology’ (1998: 25).

\(^5\) Virtually the only institution in Britain that taught sociology before 1950 was the London School of Economics. The failure of sociology to embed itself in British universities in the early 1900s was, according to Abrams (1968: 4), because the impulse for social reform, which might have led to its institutionalisation, already had plenty of outlets and a relatively responsive political system (see Halsey 2004: 50).

\(^6\) The assumption that Parsons did produce a unified conception of sociology even amongst functionalists has been challenged by Eisenstadt, who argued that ‘despite claims to the contrary, especially by opponents, the structural-functional school was neither uniform nor unchanging’, indeed, ‘within the school, many internal controversies, disputes and “openings” existed (Eisenstadt and Curelaru 1976: 180).
Two Models of Identity: Scientific, Humanistic

The fissures that criss-cross the terrain of sociology are many and varied, but in terms of its lack of unified identity the tension between the scientific and the humanistic model has until recently been the most significant division. For those who believed that the social sciences were essentially the same as the natural sciences, and who sought to establish sociology along those lines, continuing to focus on the works of the classic authors would ensure only that the discipline remained in its infancy. For them, sociology, like any other science should progress cumulatively by testing empirical hypotheses, gradually eliminating those that proved false. Once the classics have been exhausted as sources of testable propositions, they argued, sociology should shrug off the focus on these early thinkers and move on to new ground. In the process it will signal its maturity as a science by constructing covering laws (Merton 1968: 1–38, original shorter version Merton 1949). Failure to do this would leave the discipline mired in a pre-scientific state, for as A. N. Whitehead (1974) famously remarked, ‘a science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost’. Capturing the same idea anecdotally, though more vividly, Levine (1995: 65) refers to a memo circulated in the University of Chicago in 1952, which recommended that sociology staff refrain from teaching the work of the early authors to undergraduates, as it was equivalent to giving lectures on alchemy to chemistry students.

In contrast to the scientific model, since the late 1960s a broadly hermeneutic alternative has become more prominent. It seeks to draw the discipline away from its aspiration to join the natural sciences, and implicitly directs it towards the humanities. There were reasons for this putative shift in identity some of which were external and some internal to the discipline. In terms of externalities, political and cultural challenges to the societal status quo in the 1960s had the effect of casting mainstream sociology in an increasingly unfashionable, conservative light. The important function attributed to the principles of objectivity and value-neutrality amongst sociology’s scientific community seemed to many younger sociologists like an avoidance tactic, providing a smoke-screen behind which issues of social justice were concealed. Sociology, it
was felt, should speak out against injustice, and if it did not it would be complicit with the perpetrators of that injustice.

Internally, the philosophy of social science opened up the importance of language to sociology through the ideas of the later Wittgenstein as brought to its attention through the work of Winch (1958, 1974). If the language of science was but one ‘language-game’ amongst others, then the principle of objectivity was not the straightforward matter scientific sociology had assumed. Similarly, in suggesting that scientific progress was not simply cumulative, but the outcome of historically contingent paradigm changes, Kuhn’s (1962) work also indirectly undermined the ground of scientific sociology. If, as he argued, progress in the natural sciences was not cumulative, but involved contingent paradigm shifts, how much less likely was it that progress in sociology would be the result of steady accumulation.

The effect of these and other more phenomenological ideas was to heighten a sense that the social world had distinctive properties and as these were different from those of the natural world, sociology would have to frame itself along correspondingly different lines. In many ways, this was a resurfacing of the German tradition of the geisteswissenschaften. The symbolically pre-structured nature of the social world meant that the sociologist was not faced with ‘observable’ data in the way the natural scientist was, but more accurately speaking was ‘addressed’ by complexes of social meaning. Access to these complexes involved understanding their meaning (Sinnverstehen) in a certain way: that of a virtual participant in their production (Habermas 1984: 107–108). Because of the dialogical, participatory nature of this relation, questions of fact and questions of value for the sociologist could never be entirely separated. ‘Meaning’ in the social world was never a matter only of description; it would invariably also entail evaluation. Given this, and the on-going discursive and contestable nature of the social world, some accounts of it would inevitably prove more insightful in the way they linked these elements together. Insofar as these ideas gained ground, there arose the logical possibility of classic texts in sociology. Classic texts, it was argued, by virtue of their insightfulness generate a surplus of meaning which can transcend the boundaries of their original context, and provide insights that continue to enhance the understanding of meaning in the present (Alexander
On this account, sociology might position itself alongside other ‘canonical’ disciplines such as philosophy or literary criticism. The canon, rather than scientific method, would become the intellectual core of the discipline. Around this hub, sociology could cast its identity, its classics providing a backcloth of assumptions with which all sociologists would become familiar and through which contemporary practitioners would be able to develop their own ideas.

Although this latter view of the classic is one I shall develop during the course of this book, there is a danger in seeing the competing claims of the scientific and the humanistic versions of sociology’s identity with their contrasting attitudes towards the classics as exact opposites. In reality, things were and are more complicated. While rejecting empiricist notions of truth, for example, neither Habermas nor Jeffrey Alexander advocates a relativist alternative. They do not dismiss the significance of truth claims based on empirical data, but argue for a more extensive version of truth, one that incorporates the validity of agreements over matters of normative value. Likewise, while Merton was clearly a proponent of the scientific model, he was also aware of sociology’s kinship with the humanities. He acknowledged the power of its classic texts and admitted honestly, if contradictorily, that he had ‘long shared a reluctance to lose touch with the classics even before finding a rationale for it’ (1968: 30). One could also measure the seriousness with which he regarded the classics through his willingness to devote nearly two years of graduate seminars to combing through the work of the least scientific and unsystematic of classical sociologists, Georg Simmel (see Levine 1981: 62).

A similarly ambivalent attitude towards the classic can be found in the work of Edward Shils, a contemporary of Merton. In the final section of his essay ‘The Calling of Sociology’ (1961: 1405–1448) he reflected on the question of what relevance the classics might have for the progress of sociological theory. Initially he noted that the progress sociology had made in the 1950s through the application of scientific techniques made it superior to earlier work.

[sociology] makes cumulative progress, revising and clarifying its foundations, extending its scope, unifying discrete observations into coherent patterns of observation. If one reads almost any significant sociological work
of the past decade and contrasts it with works of preceding decades or centuries, one cannot deny the greater approximation to reality, the greater subtlety of interpretation of motives and causes, the greater richness of the categories. (Shils 1961: 1146)

Like Merton, he recognised that logically speaking this progress should make its classics superfluous to modern sociology and that we should expect them to 'be overtaken and then left behind' (1961: 1147). Yet, he went on to insist that despite these advances the classics of sociological thought would remain an important focus of interest, and they were in fact compatible with disciplinary progress. Other social sciences, such as economics and psychology, may have dispensed with their classics, but sociology, he noted, was different. Sociology’s classics remain alive for us, he argued, not because the discipline had failed to reach scientific maturity, but because there is ‘something inherent in sociological thought’, which will render its classics ‘long-enduring sources of renewal’. This inherent feature is what he called their ‘personal element’ (1961: 1148). By this, he meant that the classics were of lasting importance because they dwelt on the fundamentals of social existence, and these fundamentals were ‘primitives’, which could only be grasped through personal experience.

…however much we succeed in systematizing, codifying, routinizing it—however close we bring it to the natural sciences in rigor of procedures, the reliability of observation, and in refinement of demonstration, [sociological analysis] will always retain an important element of the personal. By this, we mean that the most elementary categories, the most fundamental variables will have to be apprehended through an experience, through a kind of secular revelation. (Shils 1961: 1448)

His point was that regardless of how much we shape research terms to make them operationally scientific, neither that effort nor the results that follow from the research will ultimately determine our theories. It is, rather, the preceding, primordial experiences we have of matters such as love, hate, the desire to overthrow authority, or an attachment to it, which guides our understanding in shaping the theories we have of the social world. Moreover, sociology’s classics have disclosed the significance
of this experiential bedrock. They have, he argued, ‘been forced from life and the world by the exertions of uniquely powerful minds’, and disclose ‘with the force of direct personal experience, a vision of what is enduringly significant to those who would understand the nature of society’ (1961: 1448).

What makes Merton’s and Shils’ accounts of the classic striking is that as sociologists they were amongst the most eminent of their ‘positivist’ time. Yet while they expected the discipline to continue developing as an empirically progressive science, they still found the insights of the classics irresistible; their attitude was one of admiration, not irritation. There are, though, differences even between them. Merton’s essay, which was entitled ‘On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory’ and originally published in 1949, is regarded by some as the key moment when the positivist model of sociology rose to explicit pre-eminence, at least in the Anglophone world (Turner 2004: 154). It signalled a parting of the ways between those who wished to preserve the history of social thought, including the classics, as a viable area of sociology, and those like Merton (and Parsons), who wanted to disown the field and gradually dispense with the classics. Nevertheless, Merton’s essay involved a recognition that as things stood sociologists must continue to have ‘dialogues’ with their forebears because not everything useful had been retrieved from them. The essay culminates in the idea that sociology will maintain its relationship with the classics until they have been surpassed and their value absorbed into the tradition as happens in the natural sciences (1968: 38). In short, the classics will continue to be valued, but Merton

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7 Turner S. mockingly describes the period following the original publication of Merton’s essay in 1949, as ‘The Great Instauration’, echoing the work of the sixteenth century English philosopher Francis Bacon, who urged book burning as necessary for the emergence of the New Science.

8 The picture is complicated by the fact that while Turner describes Parsons’ claims for scientific sociology as ‘absurdly triumphalist’, while Habermas (1987: 199–200), no friend of positivism, makes clear his admiration for Parsons as a social theorist, not a positivist.

9 Parsons’ essay, ‘The Prospects of Sociological Theory’ (1950), delivered as the Presidential Address to the American Sociological Society in 1949, rejects the speculative thought of Spencer, but accepts the continuing relevance of Weber and Durkheim. The weakness of the kind of speculative thought characteristic of Spencer’s is that of ‘premature closure’, that is, of assuming that no further empirical clarification is necessary beyond his merely illustrative accounts of societies. Weber and Durkheim, Parsons (1950: 6) maintains, have shown the inadequacy of the “utilitarian framework” and highlighted the importance of social institutions to sociological enquiry.
is in no doubt their usefulness will recede as sociological science proceeds. Thirty years later Lewis Coser (1981) put some flesh on the bones of Merton’s idea by specifying what actually might still be drawn from the classics. The classics, he argued, sensitise the sociologist as to what best to look for; they provide a way into the mass of inchoate material he or she faces, as well as a conceptual toolkit for making sense of counter-intuitive evidence. However, by the time Coser wrote this essay, unlike Merton, he no longer foresaw a time when sociology would pass beyond its classics, because the discipline had not advanced as a science sufficiently to make them redundant (1981: 181–182). Nevertheless, both Coser’s and Merton’s admiration for the sociological classics is essentially instrumental. Both see the classics in terms of their usefulness as tools to be employed in the enterprise of scientific sociology, whether this has advanced sufficiently or not. Shils, by contrast, valued the classics for their intrinsic worth.

For Shils, the classics are more than merely useful. He maintained a principled support for them, not because of their utility in providing concepts or empirical evidence, but because they afforded access to the pre-conceptual foundations of social life per se and thereby would remain permanently relevant. Hence, the persistence of classic texts in sociology is not, he believed, the result of the discipline’s continuing lack of scientific maturity, but of the power they exert in providing insight into the fundamental ways all societies work. Shils’ ideas at this point, although not ostensibly phenomenological, point to the classics as pathways into that pre-reflective lifeworld upon which social reality is built.

Shils, Tradition and Post-traditional Sociology

Shils’ essay is important for another reason. In the section of it entitled ‘Past and Present’ (1961: 1426–1428), he raises the issue of sociology prizing the present over the past. He developed this theme more extensively and beyond the boundaries of sociology in a long essay ten years...

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10 In this essay, Coser uses concepts derived from Marx to develop an explanation that accounts for the different kinds of support the Nazis gained from the German working class.
later, entitled ‘Tradition’ (1971) and then in a book of the same name in 1981. In the 1961 essay he draws attention to tradition as something crucial to the way societies sustain themselves. In its eagerness to focus on the immediacy of the present, sociology, he believes, invariably ignores the full significance of tradition.

Neither in the mental constitution of sociologists nor in the assessment of the societies they have studied have the power and the fascination of the past been prominent. The predominant conception of modern society as cut loose from tradition gives adequate evidence of this deficient appreciation of pastness. A very extraordinary feature of almost all of contemporary sociological literature is the pervasive absence of any analysis of tradition. This omission only confirms the insensateness of sociologists to the significance of the past to other human beings, and their own deficient sense of the past. (Shils 1961: 1427)

The reason tradition should be relevant to sociology, he argues, is that human beings have a need to locate themselves within the scope of a map that is more extensive than one only of the present. Indeed, the meaning of the past is not exhausted in being ‘the parent of the present’ (1961: 1427): the past is more than just what has preceded the present; it carries a value of its own. Although Shils does not press the issue further as to what exactly this value is, there is an implication that there are elements of the past, which have significance for the present and indeed continue into the present in a way that sociology has been unable to conceptualise. It is not just a matter of sociology adding some ‘history’ to the present, but of grasping the significance of tradition because people in all societies understand themselves through it. To use a colloquial phrase: historical tradition tells us where we have come from.

The relevance of this idea to the current study lies in the way it helps us to understand why the challenge to classic texts comes not only from scientific sociology, but also more recently from what may broadly be called, post-traditional sociology.¹¹ I shall develop this line of reasoning in subsequent chapters, but in a preliminary way one can say that both outlooks see

¹¹I use the term, post-traditional, to describe the various relatively independent sociologies that succeeded the period of positivist hegemony, such as Marxist, Feminist, Poststructuralist,
the past, including classic texts, as something that restricts the possibilities of the present. Both outlooks are suspicious, if not downright dismissive of the past and reject any viewpoint they see as too admiring of tradition.

The challenge presented by scientific sociology is based on the possibility that through the testing of hypotheses and the gradual accumulation of knowledge about the regularities of social life, the covering laws of society can be constructed. Thus, and put rather baldly, knowledge of such regularities not only makes the content of classic texts superfluous, it also lifts the present out from the constraints of the past by opening up the possibility of controlling the future.

The tenor of the challenge posed by post-traditional sociology is somewhat different. The primacy of sociology’s aspiration to become a science, as made explicit by Merton and others, lasted from the late 1940s until the late 1960s; it persists in some quarters today (see Freese 1980; Goldthorpe 2000). It was replaced, nevertheless, by more critically orientated approaches to social inquiry that were less concerned with the value-neutrality required by science, more with issues of social (in)justice. As part of what later became known as the ‘cultural turn’, the focus of sociology altered; it moved away from factual-empirical data towards matters of cultural meaning. Such a change in priorities initially opened the classics up to hermeneutically sympathetic readings. In the USA, the publication of Robert Nisbet’s The Sociological Tradition (1966) and in Britain of Giddens’ Capitalism and Modern Social Theory (1971) led the way in establishing the work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as worthy of detailed attention. In fact, a small industry of new translations, outlooks and analyses grew up around the work of these founders, especially Marx and Marxism. Even Durkheim, whose reputation suffered by association with what became a deeply unfashionable ‘positivism’, had ten full-length books published about him between 1972 and 1978 (Levine 1995: 63).

With the shift away from the empirical towards the ethical, a moral, indeed moralistic tone came to characterise sociological inquiry. Certainly, for some, such as Irving Horowitz (1994), sociology became little more than a conduit for advertising the partisan interests of different groups.

Postmodernist. I have not used the term postpositivist as the word ‘positivist’ has become too vague and automatically pejorative to be useful.
While initially, the reception of the classics by post-traditional sociology had been sympathetic, though not uncritical, by the late 1990s and early 2000s the tone of critique had become more acerbic. Under the purview of the cultural turn, the social constructionist thesis had grown space and become the pre-eminent outlook in sociology. Its emphasis on the socially created nature of knowledge rather than its truth or validity unsurprisingly meant that when it alighted on sociology’s own classics, it found them wanting. They too were socially constructed and thus no less a product of their time and place than anything else. Perhaps the only surprising thing was that it took so long for sociology to become critical of its founders as social constructionism in the form of Feminism and Foucauldian discourse analytics had become influential by the mid-1980s. It was argued that the cultural assumptions written into the fabric of the classics, particularly with regard to gender and ethnicity were morally reprehensible when compared with the assumptions we find acceptable today (Parker 1997; Marshall and Witz 2004; Reed 2006). The task, for these critics was either to dispense with the canon altogether because it represented a world well lost; expand the canon radically to include less well known authors whose ideas are more in tune with contemporary sensibilities; or critique it from a more ‘enlightened’, contemporary standpoint in an act of reconstruction (Marshall and Witz 2004: 3).

What is apparent is that the valorisation of the present at the expense of the past, in both scientific and post-traditional sociology, necessarily renders the classic vulnerable to dismissal. Like tradition broadly, the classic is seen to be ‘past it’ because it is from the past. It is part of the debris of tradition left over from the forward movement of the social world. It is this conception of the past that overshadows our understanding of the classic. While in no sense do I wish to place the classic text above critical suspicion, the effect of conceiving things in this way is to occlude the potential of the classic to show us how much we share with the past, and indeed how it might challenge the assumed superiority of the present.

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12 Insofar as the thesis refers to the idea that individuals and institutions are socially produced rather than naturally given, then all sociology could be described as social constructionist. However, here it refers to the general emphasis given to explaining how everything, which appears ‘given’, is in fact the outcome of a social process. Its aim is to undermine all fixed, essentialist notions, notably in relation to gender.
In opposition to classical sociology, both scientific and post-traditional critics maintain that the contemporary world is now so obviously different from the one Weber, Durkheim, and Marx addressed that we can no longer think of it as the same world. The assumptions they held, the categories they used and the aspirations they had are quite at odds with those we now find convincing. Moreover, they regard the work of the classic authors as inadequate to the task of representing the heterogeneity and contestability of the current world. The passing of time, it is claimed, has rendered their work redundant. Instead, we should mirror this current condition by rejecting the past, including the work of classic authors. In the case of post-traditional critics, this rejection extends further to seeing the current fragmentation of the discipline as a virtue. It is against this latter view that much in subsequent chapters is directed.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In pursuit of a coherent identity sociology has generated a contested history of unresolved issues. The ambitions of early sociologists to establish a science of society were challenged by a humanistic version of the discipline where the more hermeneutic dimensions of social life were of the essence. This chapter has explored the tensions between the two approaches, including the implications they might have for the role of the classic texts. At first sight the humanistic outlook was seen as more obviously sympathetic to the classics, but in recent times the pre-eminence of the social constructionist thesis within the humanistic camp has challenged the classic. Classics, it has been argued, are no less a social construction than anything else and thus as mundane and prone to demystification as any other artefact.

In the course of the chapter it was noted that the work of Shils, while seeming to belong on the side of scientific sociology was actually on the cusp between it and a more humanistic view. He acknowledged the scientific aspirations of the discipline but simultaneously accepted the centrality of the hermeneutic dimension of social life, recognising sociology’s classics as those texts which addressed this dimension most thoroughly.

His work also recognised the significance of tradition as essential for the health of all societies and as something for which sociology had a blind
spot. Broadly speaking, I believe, there are two complementary impulses at work in this blind spot, which also serve to obscure the value of the classic text. They are: (1) a tendency for sociology to diminish the significance of the past, and (2) a corresponding propensity to amplify the importance of the present. The former is dealt with in the next chapter, the latter in Chap. 5. Neither of these impulses originates in the last two decades, though the force of each has been heightened in that time. In Chap. 4 the impulse to diminish the past is explored more thoroughly in relation to various sociological outlooks, indicating that despite the overt differences between them they share a common antipathy towards it. It is argued that the inability of sociology to conceptualise the past positively, is driven by its negative attitude towards tradition. If tradition is seen as little more than the unreflective habit of accepting things as they are, it produces the idea that it is fundamentally repressive of human agency. The concepts of ‘hyper-reflexivity’, ‘trajectory of the self’ and the ‘pure relationship’, recently developed by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, will be discussed in this light.

In Chap. 5 the impulse to amplify the present at the expense of the past is considered in terms of postmodernist sociology. Postmodernism’s emphasis on the destabilisation of meaning in the contemporary world, and its claim that reality is now fundamentally indeterminate, form the basis of its critique of sociology and its classic texts. The claim of postmodernist sociology that the real has now effectively dissolved is accompanied by a demand that sociology should also disappear, because its ‘object’, society, no longer exists. By implication sociology’s classic texts are similarly redundant. Against this view I shall argue that the central ideas of postmodernist sociology are misleading and that sociology, including its classic texts, has the capacity to conceptualise the fragmentary nature of contemporary life.

References


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