



Research Article

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Mobilization of the Classics in Sociology

Sandro Serpa

*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, University of The Azores
Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences – CICS.UAc/CICS.NOVA.UAc
Interdisciplinary Centre for Childhood and Adolescence – NICA -UAc, Portugal
Corresponding Author*

Carlos Miguel Ferreira

*ISCTE -University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal
Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences –CICS
Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies, Portugal*

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Abstract

The reading and understanding of the classical authors of sociology are informative of sociology as a science. However, is this centrality ascribed to social perspectives – which have been proposed in another social and historical context – the consolidation of a body of knowledge of sociology, in which there is a growing refinement of theory? What are the advantages, but also the limitations, of this valuation of the classics? In this position paper, mobilizing relevant literature to justify our argumentative stance, we seek to provide a contribution to answering these questions, as well as some implications.

Keywords: *Sociology; classical sociology, sociological theory*

1. Introduction

Sociology is acknowledged as a scientific discipline that views social reality in its own way by elaborating plural theoretical problems, formulating research problems in the context of these problems, and developing methodical strategies that guide empirical research (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017; Serpa, 2017; Serpa & Ferreira, 2018a, 2018b).

The designation of classics in sociology regards the recognition of a privileged status ascribed to certain authors by contemporary sociologists, who believe in the heuristic potentialities of theoretical and methodological contributions developed in previous works, to produce scientific knowledge and to guide and understand the fundamental debates of sociology throughout its development (Alexander, 1987; Ritzer, 1992; Paiva, 2014; Pinto, 2018). The authors and their classic theories are a fundamental contribution to the way one thinks about the social world, which is important for the contemporary understanding of social life (Pinto, 2018).

As one of the founders of sociology, Émile Durkheim, has already put forth, sociology, as a science, seeks to explain the social by the social, through the delimitation of a specific scientific object of study of social reality, plural theoretical frameworks that structure and enable the analysis

of the information gathered, developing methodical strategies that guide empirical research, and a corpus of shared knowledge (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017).

The classical theoretical tradition, in its great plurality, is very present in sociology, both in teaching and research (Johnson, 2008). Ignatow (2020) states that,

For academic sociologists, their home discipline's traditions of theoretical speculation and theoretically guided empirical analysis are gifts that keep on giving. Every year hundreds of thousands of students worldwide enroll in required and elective undergraduate and graduate sociological theory courses. These courses cover the theoretical luminaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Marx, Weber, Mead and DuBois to Giddens and Bourdieu, while the topics covered range from theories of social integration, bureaucratic organization and class conflict to feminist theory, postmodernism, and theories of globalization and transnationalism. [...] Sociological theory provides the conceptual foundations for the leading contemporary sociological research programs and the sociological communities that support each of these programs" (pp. 3 and 5).

However, is there too much dependence on old theories to explain contemporary problems? (Johnson, 2008; Davis, 2019).

In summary, the reading and understanding of the classical authors of sociology are informative of sociology as a science. However, is this centrality ascribed to perspectives on the social – which have been proposed in another context – the consolidation of a body of knowledge of sociology, in which there is a growing refinement of theory? What are the advantages, but also the limitations, of this valuation of the classics? In this opinion paper, mobilizing relevant literature to justify our argumentative stance, we seek to provide a contribution to answering these questions, as well as some implications.

2. Sociology and the Classics

Sociology is a multi-paradigmatic science (Hernández Lara, 2018; Ferreira & Serpa, 2017). This pluralism has the main purpose of articulating “macro-social dynamics with local processes, allowing the linkage between subjective significances and practices, and focusing on the articulations between systems and actors, between structures and practices, between the reality of the social conditions of existence and the social construction of reality” (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017, p. 3).

2.1 Contributions

The classical proposals were essential in the process of institutionalization of sociology. Furthermore, they have influenced and continue to influence contemporary sociological theories (Serpa, 2017; Michetti, 2019; Narbut, 2019; Cockerham, 2014; Susen & Turner, 2011; Michalski, 2008). Susen and Turner (2011) advocate that the knowledge and mobilization of classical sociological texts are extremely relevant (Table 1).

Table 1: Importance of the study of the sociological classics in the foreseeable future

1	We have inherited a <i>vocabulary</i> from classical thinkers which forms the basis of contemporary social and political analysis and which continue to play a pivotal role in contemporary social and political thought. Of course, these concepts need constant refinement and addition.
2	Most of the <i>social issues and processes</i> that confronted the early classics are also still with us – in particular, social issues such as structural inequality, anomie, alienation, and exploitation, as well as social processes such as commodification, urbanization, differentiation, and bureaucratization.
3	Sociology can benefit from a <i>commitment to combining empirical research and theoretical analysis</i> . Such a commitment was not only central to the works of the classics, but it continues to be of pivotal importance to a discipline that is concerned with both the material and the symbolic developments of the social world.

Source: Susen & Turner, 2011.

Thus, the works of the classics are relevant and also heuristic, in addition to shapping the socio-historical context at the time of their creation (Hernández Lara, 2018; Pi Puig, 2019; Bhambra & Santos, 2017). Table 2 provides an overview of the importance of the history of sociology.

Table 2: The importance of the history of sociology

1	It shapes and maintains the discipline's identity.
2	It provides a rich fund of teaching future sociologists.
3	It informs current research and theorizing: a. It can do so either by maintaining a back catalogue of sociological knowledge production and by providing examples and advice to sociological practitioners; b. It can explore the historical contingencies informing the formation of ideas and concepts, thus historicizing elements of sociology's theory, methodology, and epistemology.
4	It reflects more broadly on the cultural status of sociology in modern societies.

Source: Adapted from Dayé, 2018.

The following is an example of the potential relevance of the classics to sociology:

1. Weber should be seen as a great theorist of modernity, because he offered a comprehensive overview of cultural, institutional and psychological matrix of modern societies; his concept of formal rationality represents a fundamental structuring principle of modernity which is manifested as demystified at the level of culture, as bureaucratization is at the institutional level and as the inner-worldly ascetism/ disciplining is at the level of personality,
2. Weber was not only a supporter of methodological individualism, but also the pioneer of analytical sociology. His ideal types can be seen as a pioneering attempt to introduce the concept of social mechanism, because they are carefully structured causal models that allow understanding and explanation of the outcome of social action,
3. in Weber's sociology there is no conflict between his grand theory of modern societies and ideal types; on the contrary they mutually support each other. Weber's grand theory of modern societies is nothing but a constellation of ideal types and social mechanisms (Aakvaag, 2013, pp. 206-209, cit. in Savić, 2015, pp. 69-70).

The previous argument in no way implies that one should not seek to update classical theories (for example, the 'Holy Trinity' of sociological thought consisting of Marx, Durkheim and Weber (Susen & Turner, 2011) to enhance their heuristic capacity (Fraga, 2019).

2.2 Limitations

The classics of sociology - Marx, Durkheim and Weber, but also Tocqueville, Simmel and the Chicago School, among others (Hernández Lara, 2018) - are all too often considered to explain all social reality (Hernández Lara, 2018). According to Reinprecht, Walch, and Šubrť (2019), "sociology appeared as a highly fragmented scientific field with dominant strands, today on the fringes of the discipline, and with peripheral and marginalized trends and positions, appreciated today as pioneers of modern sociology" (p. 11).

As Lahire pertinently suggests, "Scientific respect for a sociological work, based on rigorous evaluation and not only in its reading for the endless repetition of concepts" (Social Science Journal, 2020, p. 20) (Table 3).

Table 3: Key ideas on the classics of sociology

1	Recognize the existence of several other classics besides the three main ones.
2	Understand that they were, first and foremost, great researchers, and not only theorists but also methodologists in the societies in which they lived.
3	Deal with both society in general and more specific objects, giving rise to “general theories”, but also “intermediate theories”.
4	Accept that his legacy is a work-in-progress, both logically and empirically, nothing like the closed systems of thought
5	These classics were not only sociologists, despite the efforts of some of them to define the contours of this discipline.
6	Take them as a reference for teaching and learning to theorize, rather than to transmit a sacred tradition.

Source: Adapted from Hernández Lara, 2018.

The selection and selective critical capacity of the proposals of the classics are critical for the advancement of sociological knowledge (Hernández Lara, 2018). For example, it is key in meeting the challenges of understanding the new digital society (Ignatow, 2020), in which “the vaunted freedom of work and leisure time, work-space and leisure-place, has occurred to some, yet for many others it has created the collapse of work and non-work time and space into a digital surveillance of work, identity and social interaction” (Grimshaw, 2017, p. 1):

According to Nadolu and Nadolu (2020),

The digitalization of everyday life has become a common place reality for more than half of the global population. Being connected 24/7 on several devices, being only one click/touch away from a huge amount of digital content, being available for interactions with almost any users from around the globe have become routine. In this paper, we identify the main sociological dimensions of the so-called Homo interneticus—a new manifestation of the human condition—on the basis of new communication technologies (p. 1).

Or even, in the words of Centeno et al. (2000),

Let us take social media as an example. Karl Marx might well have predicted the role of capitalism in generating perceived needs, Emile Durkheim might have noted the rise of a new form of organic solidarity, and Max Weber might even have predicted how digital charisma would help shape politics. But could any of them have predicted or even comprehended how massive this phenomenon has become or how short a time it has taken to become the global web that it is? It is impossible to predict the effect or influence of a single tweet or tweeter from the characteristics of the individual message or the person who posts it (p. 1).

In summary, there are several intellectual shifts to be adopted to increase the heuristic capacity of sociological analysts (Table 4).

Table 4: Intellectual shifts of sociological analysts

1	Breaking with classical sociology to build upon innovative theoretical ideas.
2	Eliminating the ideological and normative focus that plagues much contemporary sociology.
3	Moving beyond teleological approaches to scientific explanation.
4	Embracing a distinctively “social” conceptualization of sociology’s subject matter.
5	Eliminating nationalistic disciplinary boundaries and the attendant parochialism that obscures the search for universal principles of social behaviour.

Source: Michalski, 2008, p. 521.

3. Conclusion

As Javeau (1998) maintains, “there is no sociology, but *sociologies*” (p. 12). Furthermore, “The shadow of the ‘founding fathers’ is never completely erased; each one of us, in our profession, tempers his discourse from a little or much of Marx, Durkheim or Weber (but also from Pareto, Simmel, Tocqueville, Wirth, Parsons, Mead, Gurvitch and many others still)” (pp. 201-202).

Given that epistemological, theoretical and methodological differences are frequent in the disciplinary space of sociology, the inherent difficulties of mutual understanding tend to emerge. However, without a minimum of understanding, communication between sociologists that follow different paradigms is difficult and unprofitable. There has to be some common basis for the cultural relationship to be effective and for the disagreement to be intelligible. This objective can only occur if the competitors know what each one says. Classics are critical in achieving this goal. The consensual recognition of a classic implies a common point of reference. The functional need for classics arises from the need to integrate the field of theoretical discourse in sociology (Alexander, 1987).

The theoretical and empirical contributions of authors defined as classics are deemed to express a privileged status in contemporary sociological analysis, that is, they have classical status in sociological theory. This privileged position entails that, in the work of sociologists, this deference is made without prior demonstration, being tacitly accepted because, as classical, the work establishes criteria of significance in a disciplinary space (Alexander, 1987). Classics reduce complexity, simplify and facilitate theoretical discussion. Classics allow general commitments to be discussed without the need for the criteria for their attribution to be made explicit. As the importance of the classics is accepted without any questioning, the sociologist can initiate empirical research on a particular object, referring to a particular classical author for purely strategic and instrumental reasons (Alexander, 1987).

It is vital to acknowledge that the classical authors of sociology have left an “opening” (Hernández Lara, 2018, p. 213). Hence, it is essential to acknowledge their potential as work that can be mobilized, discussed and even, if necessary, criticized to increase their capacity to interpret the social real (Fraga, 2019; Dhakal, 2019; Alexander, 2019). Sociology is, therefore, an “important tool to inform public policies and to provide the general public with an understanding of current challenges” (Venegas, Martín-Lagos, Romão, & Baptista, 2020, p. 9).

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