

Why Read the Classics?

Charles Tilly

Columbia University

10 August 2003

**prepared for a session on
the value of classical sociological theory
American Sociological Association annual meeting
Atlanta, Georgia, 18 August 2003**

1559 words in main text

"Who *cares*," I once heard George Homans groan, "what old Durkheim said?" With these words, Homans disrupted a recurrent departmental discussion about the place of sociological theory in the curriculum. Despite his interest in English villagers of the thirteenth century, what counted for Homans was today's ideas and evidence, not yesterday's. His vivid, livid roar represented one corner of a triangle. From Homans' angle, we should banish the classics because the whole point of social science is to get on with the matching of ideas and evidence, thereby leaving old, inferior ideas behind. From a second angle, the classics matter profoundly because they pose problems and point to possible solutions of those problems in ways that incremental investigations can never manage. Yet from a third, sociological classics take their places as puny parodies of such giants as Aristotle and Montesquieu; why should we prefer Tönnies to Thucydides?

Having set up not one but three straw men - one per angle - let me burn each of them to make space for a less flammable figure: a case for classics not as objects of veneration or as manuals for research but as available sources of justification for contemporary arguments. To put it another way, classics state crucial questions, not perennial answers.

Before proceeding to that claim, let's torch the straw men:

- Can we leave the classics behind so easily? Homans' groan actually disguised the extent to which his own work relied on a utilitarian tradition reaching back to John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.
- Must we read the classics because they dig deeper than today's analyses? Claims for the classics' greater profundity assume that classic authors' successors failed to incorporate classic insights into self-correcting research programs.
- Should we abandon sociological landmarks in favor of literary, philosophical, and historical classics? Dismissal of the sociological classics as lesser intellectual endeavors denies the desirability or feasibility of cumulative research programs with regard to human affairs.

Just as Bach and Mozart continue to inspire today's composers without providing precise templates for contemporary compositions, sociological classics remain available as alternative statements of the questions that today's sociologists can

fruitfully pursue. (By "fruitfully," I mean in ways that produce cumulative, verifiable knowledge.) Karl Marx asked, among other things, how unequal social transactions compound into large, changing systems of exploitation. Max Weber asked, among other things, what produces contrasting modes of domination and the beliefs that support them. John Stuart Mill asked, among other things, what social conditions and processes favor political equality at a national scale.

Such classics addressed problems that continue to concern analysts of social processes; how and why large-scale changes in social relations occur, what connects individual experience with massive social phenomena, where powerful new ideas come from, and so on. Classics thus serve as visible, viable justifications for what might otherwise seem trivial, obscure, or idiosyncratic inquiries. They allow investigators to declare "Look, I'm addressing an old, important question in a new way." Indeed, new classics join the old standards precisely when they state pressing, fruitful questions the older agenda did not quite articulate. Pivotal works of Robert Park, Erving Goffman, and Pierre Bourdieu come to mind. For that purpose, neither Aristotle nor Montesquieu will do.

To be sure, established questions vary in their fruitfulness. Despite a century of effort, for example, sociologists have not much advanced our answers to the standard nineteenth-century question "What drives social change in general?" The question invokes a dubious entity - social change - while pointing toward unlikely, unverifiable general answers. It has not turned out to be fruitful. In contrast, the question "How, when, and why does industrialization occur?" has motivated a cumulative set of inquiries that have produced no monolithic reply but a set of specifications, descriptions, and explanations improving significantly on their nineteenth-century predecessors. In seeking justifications for their current work, investigators should choose their classics with care.

How and why does justification matter? It matters in two essential ways. First, it commits researchers, theorists, and synthesizers to a cumulative project: identifying superior answers to the questions at hand. It thereby imports, however subtly, standards of verification, falsification, and valuation for arguments and evidence.

Second, justification marks the relation between speaker and audience, identifying the conversation in which they are engaged. Participants pay the price of learning which questions do or don't belong to the conversation, and in what languages they can address those questions intelligibly.

Better yet, the classics offer convenient ways of distinguishing one mode of question-raising from another. Identifying an inquiry with Ferdinand Tönnies does not necessarily commit a contemporary analyst to accept a general societal movement from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, but it does distinguish the question-raising at hand from an inquiry inspired by Karl Marx. We heirs of the classics therefore enjoy the luxury of pitting one line of questioning against another either to clarify what we are and aren't about or to see whether some synthesis produces more valuable results than either line pursued alone.

Three pairs of explanatory cartoons illustrate the argument. For explanations of inequality, we can compare caricatures of Karl Marx and Max Weber. For democratization and de-democratization, we can compare John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. For identity change, why not contrast Emile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead?

In cartoon form, a Marxist account of inequality begins with negotiated relations at the point of material production. As Marxists, we ask how relations of production generate unequal returns that become bases of inequality across other spheres of social life. We need not accept Marx's own enumeration of successive modes of production - feudal, capitalist, socialist, and so on - to draw inspiration from *Das Kapital*.

A cartoon of Weber singles out three partly independent arenas: a social order in which honor serves as the denominator, a market in which purchasing power serves as the denominator, and a political order in which coercive capacity serves as the denominator. To ask questions in a Weberian vein, we need not accept Weber's own account of how relations of people to the three arenas sometimes crystallize into status groups, classes, and parties.

Justification? Appeal to Marx commits an analyst at least to focus on unequal social relations, their dynamics, and their consequences. It calls up an approach to evidence in which changes of social interactions and material conditions figure more centrally than shifts in expressed attitudes. It brings its speaker into a conversation featuring such terms as exploitation, resistance, and struggle. Appeal to Weber commits an analyst at least to differentiate multiple bases and sites of inequality, to give structural position priority over negotiated relations, and to regard historically accumulated culture as exerting a significant independent influence on

individual and collective striving. Neither line in itself entails definitive verifiable propositions concerning observed social processes. Both lay out ways of posing and answering questions about inequality. At the level of inquiry, they compete.

By democratization and de-democratization, let us mean simply any set of political arrangements' moves toward or away from equal rights, obligations, and protections for all participants. Mill and Tocqueville propose competing ways not only of answering, but also of asking, questions about causes of democratization and de-democratization. Mill asks what conditions place restraints on rulers such that the action of those rulers provides protection (including protection from arbitrary governmental intervention) for all of the ruled. His familiar answers include private property, competitive markets, and a politically autonomous public realm. But his *questions* concern causes of changes in these underlying conditions as well as their consequences for the behavior of rulers.

A cartoon Tocqueville resembles a cartoon Mill in some regards, since both give importance to the social environment within which governments operate; indeed Mill adapted some of his ideas from Tocqueville. But Tocqueville's questionnaire differs from Mill's in assigning much more prominence to the centralization or decentralization of political institutions, proliferation of independent associations, and relations of different social classes to each other and to governments. Justification of an inquiry into democratization and de-democratization by appeal to Mill authorizes a search for the rise and fall of checks on governmental autonomy, while an appeal to Tocqueville authorizes more extensive investigation of interpersonal and intergroup relations outside the zone of government.

By "identity," let us mean individual and collective answers to the questions "Who are you?", "Who are they?" and "Who are we?" Emile Durkheim tied identity in this sense closely to the character and extent of societal differentiation. Mechanistic solidarity (characteristic of relatively homogeneous societies) produced deeply different identities from organic solidarity (characteristic of highly differentiated societies). A Durkheimian inquiry into identity therefore concentrates on the overall organization of society, variable connections of individuals to that organization, and resulting variations in individual consciousness.

George Herbert Mead, in contrast, gave little attention to the overall organization of society. Instead he distinguished the "I" of individual experience from the "me" of negotiated relations to others. Negotiated relations to others constitute social

identities for Mead. Whereas a Durkheimian pursues identity changes by examining alterations in general societal conditions, a Meadian emphasizes relational dynamics. Justification of current inquiries by reference to the classics leads to different ways of posing and answering questions.

It matters little for present purposes that I personally prefer Marx to Weber, Tocqueville to Mill, and Mead to Durkheim. What matters is the way that the classics, however contestable their own answers, identify distinctive, crucial, durable queries concerning social processes.