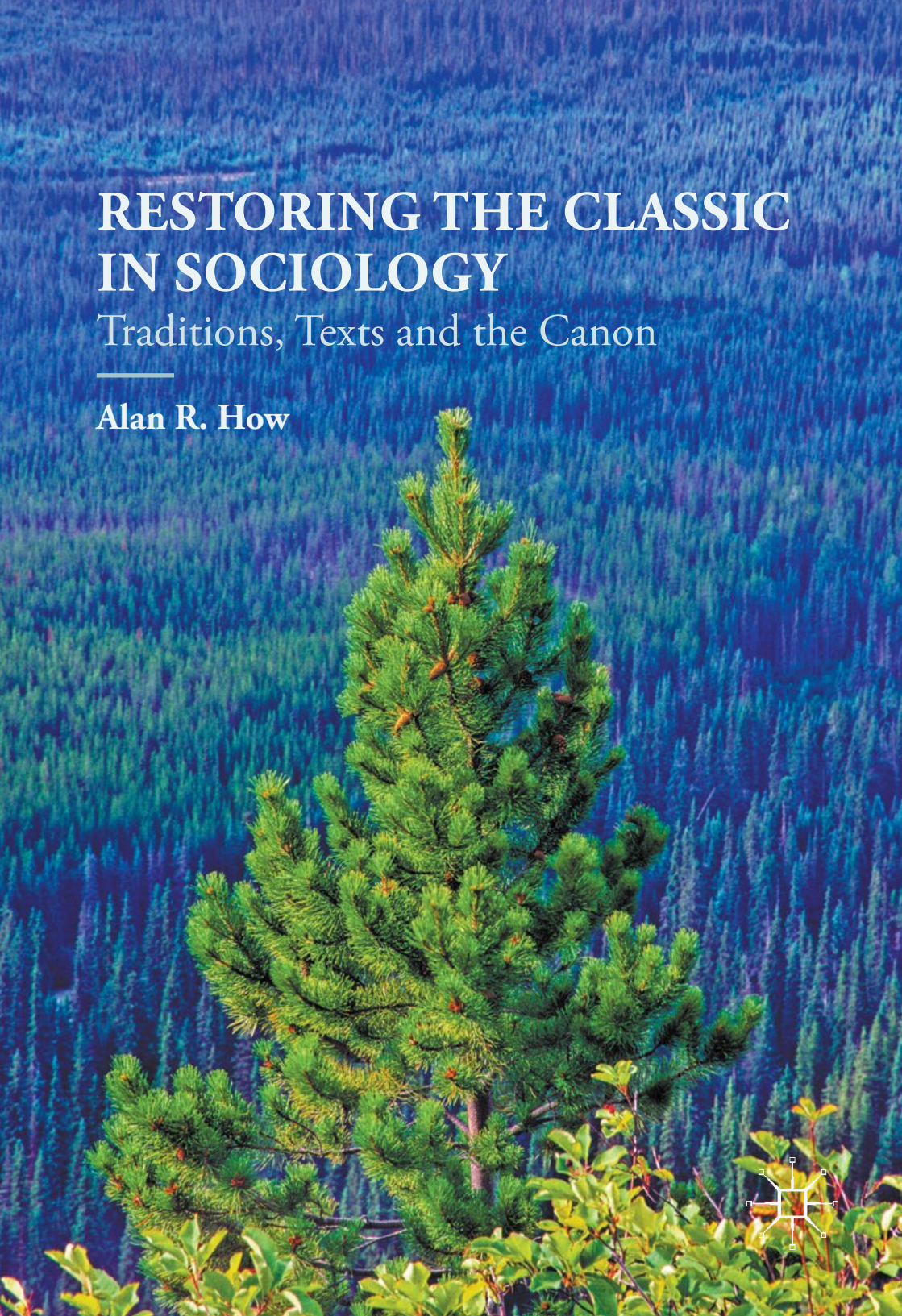
RESTORING THE CLASSIC IN SOCIOLOGY

Traditions, Texts and the Canon

Alan R. How



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Alan R. How
Humanities and Creative Arts
Worcester University
Worcester, United Kingdom

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The Issue of the Classic

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Introduction

There has been a dispute in Europe and North America as to whether classic texts should retain their status as part of a canon with which all students should become familiar, or discarded in favour of something more recent and relevant. The vigour of the debate centres on the surprising fact that classics in sociology and other disciplines continue to speak to audiences far removed in time, place and sensibility from the original ones. This book is an exploration of how this 'speaking' is possible, of why the classic persists in the face of a sociology that is committed to a transient present and thus largely indifferent to the past. It is through the concept of tradition that an explanation is sought. Tradition is not a concept that is much used in sociology, but if one conceives of it in the more familiar sociological terms of 'social integration', but stretched across time, its relevance becomes apparent. Tradition is sometimes thought of as being oppressive; we talk of the dead hand of tradition, the concept developed here, however, is one which emphasises that tradition is frequently contested and preserves 'difficulty' as readily as harmony. Its role in social life is considerable as is its importance to an understanding of how the classic works. For a classic to be a classic it will be argued, it must

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challenge the self-importance of the present and show how much it has in common with the past.

As there are many books about classical sociology and numerous collections of extracts from classic authors, it may be useful to say what this book is not about. It is not a textbook or commentary on, nor eulogy for, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx, nor does it offer a new set of interpretations of their work. It does not seek to limit the sociological canon, if there is one, to the famous three. There are plenty of contenders waiting in the wings to join them if they have not done so already: Georg Simmel; George Herbert Mead; Talcott Parsons; W. E. B. Du Bois; Charlotte Perkins Gilman; and to Jurgen Habermas; Zygmunt Bauman; Pierre Bourdieu. Nor does it seek to extend the canon and apply the term 'classic' to particular authors that I might favour. To become classic, it will be argued, is a process that involves an author's ideas subsequently being taken up by others and shown to be productive in myriad different ways; it is not the outcome of special pleading.

Some Background

Behind the writing of *Restoring the Classic in Sociology* there were two personal factors both concerned with what I perceived as the negative light in which classics were increasingly being regarded. The first became apparent when my duties as a university lecturer involved teaching classical and contemporary social theory to undergraduates. At that time, the mid-1980s, certain authors were distinctly *infra dig*. Durkheim, amongst the classical authors was regarded as clearly dismissible. His positivism was plain to see in his claim that fundamental to sociology was the principle that social facts must be treated as *things* external to the individual. His seeming indifference to agency, plus the overriding concern he had for the desirability of a strong externally imposed 'conscience collective' smacked of an unjust and overbearing kind of conservatism. This thread of unpopularity worked its way directly towards Talcott Parsons who was regarded in the same dismal light. His description of the structure of social action led seamlessly to an account of the social system as a reified organisation indifferent to social action as the creative source of historical

change. Held together by a ubiquitous value system, he assumed the social system was consensual, which closed off of any sense that power in society was unevenly distributed or conflict structurally inherent. Such criticisms were made concrete by feminists who argued that the Parsons' views of traditional sex-roles in the nuclear family were antiquated and oppressive towards women. Indeed, on one occasion, having run through the gamut of these criticisms to a group of students, one asked me why Parsons was being taught at all, for it seemed no one had a good word to say for him. The question was apt and my only response at the time was to say he was important in terms of the history of sociology; however I was not teaching sociological theory from the standpoint of history. The question made me re-think and re-read the work of Durkheim and Parsons to clarify why these and other classic authors should be taught. In the case of Parsons it was the writings of Jürgen Habermas and later Margaret Archer who, though not uncritical of it, highlighted its importance. What resonated from Archer (1995: 1ff) was the unflinching sociological (re-)assertion of what she called 'the vexatious fact of society', proffered as a challenge to those who would magic away the determinacy of the social system. Both she and Habermas showed that an adequate sociology needed to account for the complex, systematic way society's institutions continue on a daily basis, as well as accounting for the more pliable nature of the lifeworld. What was surprising was that Habermas, notable as being the main contemporary figure in the left-wing tradition of Critical Theory, was explicitly complimentary about Parsons whose work was usually adjudged to be right-wing. He described it as 'a body of work without equal in its level of abstraction and differentiation, its social-theoretical scope and systematic quality' (Habermas 1987: 199). In the face of the growing unpopularity of classical sociology it was a timely reminder for me of the worth of the old Critical Theory adage 'be out of step'. Habermas also noted with approval that Parsons paid his key source authors, Durkheim, Weber, and Vilfredo Pareto, the compliment of treating them as his contemporaries. That is, he regarded their work not in historical terms, not as something to be read off flatly as the product of its historical context, but as something that exceeded its context and was worthy of critical appropriation in the present and for the present. It is a view that underpins the ideas of this book.

The second factor was the general intellectual climate of that time, in particular the emergence of a body of poststructuralist thought in the field of literary theory that was critical of the literary canon. I had a colleague and friend in the English department who felt quite passionately that the literary canon was no more than a hall of fame for outdated ideas and socially repressive attitudes. The aim of literary studies, he argued, should be to disassemble the supra-historical pretensions of the literary classics and to see them instead as examples of how a culture at a particular time saw itself. Literature, it was argued, articulated the dilemmas of a specific moment and should be explained only in those terms. The idea that a text, any text, could have some intrinsic power of transcendence such that it could speak meaningfully to subsequent generations was anathema. If a classic text does appear to have this 'intrinsic' ability it is because a particular set of circumstances allowed it to become visible initially, and then be sustained by another complex set of cultural, economic, political, and institutional interests (Tompkins 1985).

The irony was that while I was starting to explore the contemporary value of sociology's classics, he was intent on turning literary studies into a kind of sociology. Where I was trying to determine the nature of 'classicity'[1] in order to assess the value of the sociological classic to the discipline's curriculum, he was using sociological concepts such as ideology and cultural capital to expose what he saw as the myth of the literary classic and the empty grandeur of the literary canon. Time appeared to be on his side as the outlooks in the ascendant at that point, both in literary and social theory, were poststructuralism and postmodernism with their emphasis on the discursively constructed nature of reality. Such was the iconoclasm of the key authors in this movement, Jean Baudrillard; Michel Foucault; Jean-Francois Lyotard, that all the certainties of sociology, let alone its classic texts, came under suspicion. Paul Ricoeur (1970: 32ff) had coined the phrase 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' in the mid-1960s to highlight an interpretive outlook where all appearances were to be distrusted and their validity challenged. Though he was referring to the ideas of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, it was a prescient insight for the

[1] I use the word 'classicity' in a phenomenological way to refer to the essence of a classic, or the quality of its 'classic-ness'.

movement towards poststructuralist and postmodernist thought brought fundamental doubt to the basic concepts used in the human sciences, indeed to the value of conceptual thought altogether. If the role of the classic was to be restored this new nihilistic mood in the world of social theory had to be challenged for it had the implication that a classic, at least in theory, was reader-less, referent-less, and author-less.

Poststructuralism and the Reader-less, Referent-less, Author-less Text

Talcott Parsons was once accused of working with an 'over-socialised conception of man' (Wrong 1980), but did nevertheless *have* a conception of man (*sic*), albeit one that explained the behaviour of actors as an epiphenomenon of system imperatives. With the arrival of Foucault's poststructuralism not only did the idea of a system seem to disappear, so did human beings as active agents; both were subsumed under a quilt of interlocking discursive structures. Although Nicos Mouzelis (1995: 47) finds a 'teleological' parallel between Foucault's 'de-centring of the subject' and Parsons' 'over-socialised' view, in that both see human behaviour as drawn into meeting the needs of larger entities, a significant difference remains. Foucault's 'de-centring' took Parsons' 'over-socialised' view a decisive step further because under the aegis of discursive structures socialisation became a totally one-way process, filling up and dissolving the individual entirely.

Where 'social construction' in the hands of Berger and Luckman (1966) had originally implied that the social world involved a two-way dialectical process between structures and agents, in the hands of Foucault and others social construction meant that everything was socially constructed; 'societies', 'agents', 'subjects' and 'selves' had no ontological depth but were constituted through the interplay of contingent discourses. A discursive formation or discourse[2] was a way of talking, thinking and acting according to rules that were in line with particular socio-historical

[2] The 'discursive formation' is characteristic of Foucault's early 'archaeology' work, but 'discourse' as an idea persists into his later 'genealogy' work.

arrangements. Objects, 'things', including the (human) subject were constituted, defined and classified through these discursive relations. Famously Foucault (1980) described the re-defining of the (human) subject in terms of the changing discourses of discipline and punishment from the 'sovereign' to the 'carceral', with what we now call the modern reflexive individual emerging from the latter. What this amounted to for the sociologist who is concerned with the identity of human beings was captured by Stuart Hall (1998: 6) as a contingent affair:

> Identities are points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or "chaining" of the subject into the flow of discourse.

In other words the human subject has no self, no identity, no being, except that bequeathed by the subject positions constructed for it by discursive practices. For this disembodied creature identity is like a temporary suit of clothes through which he or she is shackled into the stream of discourse. Insofar as the human subject as a willing, conscious, reflexive individual is effectively dissolved in poststructuralist theory, then classic texts, all texts will have lost their readers as reading presumes a skilled, embodied subject capable of understanding what a text has to say to them about a world beyond them.

If embodied humans fared ill under this regime, society and its social institutions fared no better. It fell to Baudrillard (1983: 79ff) as a sociologist[3] to signal 'the end of the social'. In sociology there has been a successful critique of the tendency to reify 'society', to make it thing-like and unchangeable, but with Baudrillard the very concept of society is seen to be an empty one. The rapid development and deployment of modern information technology with its capacity to simulate reality has had, he claimed, the effect of de-realising reality. Concepts such as 'society' and 'social relations' no longer served a purpose because they referred to things that have become unreal. As a result the same institutions that appear to signal 'society' now do the opposite:

[3] Many dispute that he was a sociologist as his work is closer to cultural philosophy than social science. He was though a full Professor of Sociology at Université de Paris-X (Nanterre).

> Thus the institutions which have sign-posted the "advance of the social" (urbanization, concentration, production, work, medicine, education, social security, insurance, etc.), including capital, which was undoubtedly the most effective socialization medium of all, could be said to produce and destroy the social in one and the same movement (1983: 79).

Sociology has long been aware that its 'object', be it society, structured social relations or situated interaction, is problematic in ways that is not true of the observational data of the natural sciences. But the idea that there is no 'object' out there for the sociologist to approach is, I think, provocative and misleading. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim dealt with the subject-object relation in different ways but their theories showed no doubt that social reality conceived as existing outside those theories could be represented in them. In contrast, the advent of postmodernism suggests that the real has no existence independent of the language we use to describe it. It is argued that because there is no gap between language and reality, if sociology persists with its canon of classic authors it reinforces the illusion that society has a real substantive existence, when in fact it is a conceptual abstraction, a fiction created by and through sociological texts (Denzin 1992: 23). The task for anyone interested in classical sociological theory then can only become the deconstructive one of working out how these authors bring off the *idea* of social reality in their texts. It would involve jettisoning the distinction between reality and fiction, 'exploring what the ideas of reading, writing and text might contribute to social and cultural analysis' (Game 1991: 3).

Different terms have been used to describe the sub-text of the postmodernist movement in social theory:[4] the linguistic turn; the crisis of representation; the cultural turn; the textualist turn. Each in its way involves what Perry Anderson (1983: 43) has called the 'exorbitation of language', that is, an overstretching of the power of language in the construction of social reality. The focus on language and meaning is not new in sociology.

[4] I am using the term 'social theory' and 'sociological theory' fairly interchangeably as their subject matter often overlaps. However there is a difference in that social theory is closely related to social philosophy and applies to disciplines other than sociology. Critics might fairly argue that it is sociology's willingness to adopt social theory ideas, rather than sociological ones that has led it into Baudrillard's postmodernist dead end.

In fact much in the same way that sociology prior to Foucault had regularly de-centred the subject with Functionalism, Marxism, and Feminism subordinating agency to the social, capitalist, and patriarchal systems, so also sociology has regularly challenged any simple notion of representation. The critique of Durkheim's account of suicide by the interpretive sociology of Douglas (1967) and Atkinson (1978), for example, was based on Durkheim's mistaken (*sic*) view that the act of suicide could be represented directly in suicide statistics. They showed that the meaning of suicide was socially constructed in different situations and was therefore a more textured and open-ended phenomenon than Durkheim's account maintained. However, while Jack Douglas and Max Atkinson had sought to get to the reality of suicide by representing it in a more subtle and nuanced way than Durkheim had done, postmodernism spurned the idea that there was a reality that could be reached or represented, subtly or otherwise. It went a step further than acknowledging the importance of language for an understanding of reality by denying there was a reality 'out there' at all. It adopted and extended Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language, which sealed the generation of meaning into language (langue) as a system. The meaning of a linguistic sign (word), it was claimed, was not determined by the 'thing' it referred to (the signified), but by the signifier (its sound or written form) and its relations to other signifiers.[5] In effect language stopped short of reality. When Saussure's ideas were adopted by postmodernist authors, meaning was seen to be generated from *within* language. It becomes a free-floating construction and actual human speakers are reduced to being the conduits of a language system with nothing real of their own to say. It also means that texts have no 'object' beyond them to refer to. Where one might expect the classic text to show insight into things more than other texts, on this account there is no longer anything for them to have insight into. The classic is as referent-less any other text.

If under the auspices of postmodernism texts no longer had a referent or a reader, they also became author-less. In the late 1940s there had been a discussion by Robert Merton (1968) of the problematic status of classic authors in sociology. If the discipline was to move forward to

[5] For an astute critique of Saussure that shows how he breached his own ideas see Archer (2000: 26–28).

become a fully fledged science, like other sciences the ideas of its early authors would become redundant. By empirically testing the hypotheses of the classic authors their ideas would progressively be altered or eliminated in the same way as happens in the natural sciences. However, while the rejection of the classic authors sprang from its early positivist ambitions, it was echoed more vehemently by the anti-positivist influence of poststructuralism. Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1977) and Foucault's *What is an Author* (1988) both derided the authority attributed to authorship.

For Barthes the 'author' was an historical invention and an illusion. Once facts are narrated, he maintained, they function intransitively outside anything except the symbolic use of language itself. The author's voice is lost as soon as the writing begins. In fact because we only know the author through the book, in a sense the book creates the author rather than the author the book. The reason we submit to what he called the tyranny of authorship is because it is an ideological expression of capitalism's emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual (author).

Foucault's account was subtler and more extensive, but made a similar point. For him the authorship of a text is not the straightforward source of the truth of that text. The relation between the author and the text is a historically relative one in that the 'author function' has changed over time. It is only since the seventeenth century that literary texts acquired an author who owned and was responsible for them. On the other hand the authorship of scientific treatises, which once required a Hippocrates or a Pliny to make it true, has now faded in the face of the repeatability of experimental truth. Foucault recognised that with the social sciences the issue was slightly different. As authors such as Marx and Freud fit into neither the fictive nor the natural science category their authorship has to be seen in a different light. They are to be regarded as the founders of discourses, but their discourses are not tied to their authorship because they produce discursive practices that diverge from the original. However, for all the countless revisions that Marx and Freud's work has undergone, the revisers do not declare Marx and Freud to be wrong; they still draw on the original author's work as the source for their ideas. If there are propositions that are false, they are declared to be 'prehistoric' or part of a discourse alien to the author's real discourse. I presumed that Foucault

had in mind Althusser's rejection of Marx's early humanism, but Jacques Lacan's challenge to Sigmund Freud was no less radical and made him no less a Freudian than Louis Althusser was a Marxist. For all that they modify the original, in the social sciences revisions invariably refer back to the earlier authored discourse.

Nevertheless, like Roland Barthes, Foucault saw reference back to the author as the source of truth as an ideological construction. To tie the meaning of a text down to what the author meant, he argued, limits, impedes, and frustrates the proliferation of significance and the development of new discourses. He anticipated a point of liberation where 'all discourses would develop in the anonymity of a murmur' (1988: 210).

However, in spite of Foucault's expectation that contemporary cultural changes (postmodernism) would gradually see off the 'author-function', the authority of the author remains alive and well. Ideas in sociology do not stand pure and simple in their own right. Should this be a source of embarrassment? It seems to me that because sociologists are invariably dealing with matters that are normative and factual, and their work often takes a discursive form, hopes for such disinterested purity would not only be misleading, they would undermine the discipline too, in deflecting attention away from the richness of classic authors' work. Part of the reason we respond to 'names' is that we hold the authors of classic texts in high regard; they are responsible for the light their work has shone on something that was previously opaque. Admiration is provoked by the sudden clarity that flows from the insight such authors bequeath us.

Against this it could still be argued that it is the text that has produced this response not the author, who is quite invisible as a person to the reader. Nevertheless, as Martin Jay (1993: 173) points out, we can never completely efface the authorial voice in the reading of a text, even if we accept poststructuralist arguments that the 'real' author is never present. Jay argues this on the basis of two linguistic concepts, 'parabasis' and 'prosopopeia'. The former refers to the way an authorial voice always intrudes into written discourse, because that discourse necessarily has both an objective and a subjective structure. The latter refers to the inevitable evocation of a 'face' with respect to an idea. While these are rhetorical tropes, they both speak implicitly of the fact that texts refer to a communicative world beyond themselves, where an author is implied

no less than a reader. Even mundane, anonymous texts, such as shopping lists or supermarket receipts, carry the mark of human purpose. They invariably assume some authorial intent, some initial authorial inscription that comes with the meaning of the text as it is understood.

These arguments were a timely reminder for me that sociological texts will not work for us as impersonal statements without being grounded in the assumptions of the lifeworld. Equally though we should beware of sliding into an overpersonalised situation, where the truth of a classic text subsides in face of an admiration only for what an author, defined as 'great', really meant. Certainly Hans-Georg Gadamer, an author on whom I draw frequently later in the book, points out that the dialogical nature of understanding invariably exceeds the intentions of the interlocutors, be they the author and the reader or actual people engaged in conversation. To understand a book or another person, he says is 'to come to an understanding about the subject matter, not to get inside another person and relive his experiences' (1989: 383). Although this view might seem to be close to the poststructuralist idea of the 'death of the subject', it is not because 'coming to an understanding' pre-supposes embodied beings that can come to understand a text or another person in a dialogical way.

I do not want to labour the ideas of poststructuralism or postmodernism, nor undertake an extensive critique of them. I imagine by now readers know that my sympathies do not lie in that direction. This is not to say that they have made no contribution to sociology; eliminating the 'subject' the 'author' and 'society' has produced some interesting, though lopsided, analyses. Nevertheless, notions such as 'death of the subject' or 'the end of the social' have the feel of being intellectual creations rather than ideas drawn from the reality they claim to explain. In the everyday world, outside academia, the human subject has not dissolved; as a person he or she still moves around purposefully amidst similar others with a continuous sense of 'self' and in socially real situations. Of course these concepts can be problematised and sociology has regularly done this, but to dissolve them altogether contradictorily severs the explanation from the thing to be explained.

I have nevertheless dwelt on this intellectual movement because it was part of the climate of suspicion that sought to undermine the value of the classic text in sociology and thereby something that needed to be

addressed if it was to be sustained or restored. Because much of it is influenced by Saussure's synchronic account of language it predisposes sociology to focus on the present at the expense of the past, which diminishes the likelihood of the classic being found relevant. It is an outlook that I later describe as sociology's antipathy to the past and for which the significance of tradition is brought into play as a counterweight and as that through which the classic is able to show its significance.

Structure of the Book: A Circuitous Route

The approach adopted is a circuitous one as the aim is not simply to applaud the classics or criticise the critics, but to get a wider sense of the cultural mood that makes the classic susceptible to dismissal and why this is a mistaken view. It has meant exploring the history of sociology, its various identities and the fault lines that limit or diminish the significance of its classics. It has also meant seeking a solution to the puzzle of why classics still persist in the face of what is often a cool climate in the rather esoteric area of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Those who might wish to go straight to the 'answer' would need to read Chaps. 7 and 8, which are two linked chapters that culminate in an explanation of the nature of the classic text via an extended discussion of the Habermas – Gadamer debate over the methodology of the social sciences. I use this debate as a vehicle to show the significance of the hermeneutic account of tradition and how it reveals the nature of the classic text. In sociology Habermas has usually been thought the 'winner' of the debate, but I shall argue that this is wide off the mark and that Gadamer's ideas are more convincing. Nevertheless, Habermas' critique provides the rigorous and well informed challenge enabling the strength of Gadamer's 'tradition' to become apparent. It also brings hermeneutics into the realm of social and sociological theory.

The book divides into three sections. The first section includes the Introduction (this chapter) and Chap. 2 where the nature of the issue is set out and the claims of critics of the classic and the canon are explored and an initial response is formulated.

The focus is widened in section two to explore how the identity of sociology has changed over time and how this has had an impact on the disci-

pline's perception of its classic texts and authors. The oft contested identity of sociology is examined in Chap. 3 in relation to the differences between scientific and humanistic definitions of the discipline. One might expect advocates of the humanistic model to be more sympathetic to the idea of a classic text than the scientific model, but things are found to be more complicated. Robert Merton and Edward Shils were both eminent 'positivists' in their time but both found the insights of the classic irresistible. Shils' ideas on tradition are noted as he was the first author to recognise both the importance and the absence of 'tradition' in the sociological vocabulary.

In Chap. 4 the antipathy of sociology to the past is met head on and located in terms of the Enlightenment's suspicion of tradition. Four sociological traditions, Functionalism, Critical Theory, Interactionism and Empirical (Scientific) Sociology are considered in terms of their inability to conceptualise the past successfully. The opposition to tradition is seen not only as a cognitive limit but also as part of a broader moral desire to overthrow the past—something notably characteristic of the work of Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre; but also in the more familiar setting of Ulrick Beck and Anthony Giddens' work. It is suggested that a resolution to this one-sidedness is found in the idea of tradition as 'social integration stretched across time', which is introduced via David Lockwood's important distinction between social and system integration.

In Chap. 5 postmodernism is seen to be the most recent approach in sociology to deny the importance of the past and is challenged on this basis. Using the ideas of authors such as Archer, John Scott and Bryan Turner the chapter challenges the mooted postmodernist sociologies of Baudrillard, Norman Denzin, and John Urry as they bear on the nature of time, the identity of sociology, and the referent-less and reader-less text. It is claimed that only when the limitations of postmodernist concepts are made apparent that the relevance of the past, tradition, and the classic can become apparent. This is because the ground for the ability of the classic to speak beyond its original context lies in the myriad, often subterranean ways the past continues into the present.

In Chap. 6 the importance of tradition and habit, both for the social world and as the ground of the classic text, are explored more thoroughly. Sociological authors have generally been sceptical of tradition anticipating its gradual demise; an analysis of the de-traditionalisation debate

concludes that a process of re-traditionalisation is a likely outcome of on-going modernity as the elimination of tradition. Attention is drawn to the underlying need society has for tradition not just in terms of familiar sociological concepts such as social integration and social solidarity, but also in terms of concepts developed by Arnold Gehlen. For him the physical vulnerability of human beings means that survival has come to depend on the effectiveness of cultural traditions as something that mediates between human defencelessness and a hazardous physical environment. Gadamer's ideas on environment and tradition were found to extend those of Gehlen, but with the additional idea that human beings *have* an environment rather than just being immersed in one as animals are. It is noted that one of the main constituents of tradition is habit, and like tradition habit is often poorly regarded as it seems to fly in the face of the autonomy we expect from conscious human agents. Yet an analysis of habit following the ideas of Felix Ravaisson; Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows that it is as much about human skill and know-how as mere repetition. Although both habit and tradition are usually conceived negatively, when reconceived positively they are shown to be a necessary precursor for writing, reading, and understanding the value of a classic text.

In section three the *raison d'etre* of the classic is presented via an account of the tradition of (Gadamer's) hermeneutics, and culminates in a discussion of the differences between the classic and the canon. Chapters 7 and 8 are linked together via a narrative account of the Habermas – Gadamer debate, which brings hermeneutics into the orbit of sociology. Chapter 7 introduces the hermeneutic tradition and moves on to the debate. It is set within the framework of what Habermas sought to draw from Gadamer's work for his project of reconstructing the Critical Theory of his Frankfurt School predecessors. The discussion is fairly detailed, focusing on the nature of language and historical horizons, which are topics that underlie the discussion of what makes a sociological classic later in Chap. 8. Chapter 8 is linked to Chap. 6 as it represents the second half of the debate. In the first half Habermas had drawn from hermeneutics what he found useful for his project, in the second half he withdraws his approval for certain things, notably the Gadamerian view of tradition. Against this, the hermeneutic account of tradition is defended and used to demonstrate the classicity of various texts including Weber's *Protestant Ethic* thesis through a dis-

cussion of Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1989).

The final chapter, Chap. 9, addresses the issue of the canon in contrast to that of the classic. The two are usually run together by critics and defenders alike as if they were the same thing, but here they are held to be separate and distinct sociological entities. The distinction between structure and agency as developed by Archer is introduced to account for the different characteristics of the classic and the canon. The classic is located on the side of agency and the canon on the side of structure. The distinction is important as the grounds for criticising or defending them alters if classic and canon are seen to have different properties. The canon is more regularly and fiercely criticised because it is thought to echo the idea of a religious canon in being fixed and impermeable. Drawing on Peter Baehr's (2002) argument this is shown not to be the case and that the academic canon is more open than its critics claim. Moreover, its role as an academic bulwark is seen to be positive and worthwhile.

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2

The Sense of an Ending

> Influential as they are, deconstruction and postmodernism are only symptoms, bright bubbles at the surface of a mutation. It is, as I have suggested, our elemental perceptions of death, our time-sense, of the related classical impulse in art and poetry to endure, to achieve timelessness, which are today in radical question.
>
> George Steiner (1997: 156)

Introduction

If getting a bad press foreshortens a text's life, the demise of the classic is long overdue. In the last thirty years, there have been thoroughgoing, sometimes vitriolic critiques of classic texts and equally vehement ripostes,

This phrase is Frank Kermode's, from his *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, 1967.

A.R. How, *Restoring the Classic in Sociology*,
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notably in literary studies[1] and more recently in sociology.[2] Ostensibly, the dispute centres on whether classic texts should be retained as part of a canon of great works which underpin a discipline and with which its students should be familiar, or be replaced by something more up to date. The debates have often been intensely political, as much reflecting the way the protagonists see their identity as the qualities of the texts themselves. In the course of these debates, even the word 'canon' seems to have changed its meaning. Where once it was a placid, descriptive term, suggestive of little more than the collective works a discipline held in high regard, it is now altogether more contentious. For its advocates it is something worth cherishing because the virtues of its classics are self-evident. Writing of sociology's classics, Gianfranco Poggi (1996: 39–40) declared that 'their unique intellectual texture [and] the magnitude of their scholarly achievement' means that we do our students a disservice if we do not bring them into contact with these texts; 'they are simply the best stuff the discipline of sociology has produced in the course of its history'. Such texts, he believes, are endlessly fruitful because 'on each reading new dimensions of significance are revealed' (1996: 43). From the

[1] The literature on the literary canon is vast, but the following are illustrative of the arguments. For a fervent defence of the intrinsic aesthetic worth of the western literary canon, see Bloom (1994). Jane Tompkins (1985) in contrast argues that literary writers wrote not for aesthetic reasons, but to secure the interest of particular audiences. For a (sociological) critique of essentialist accounts of classic literary texts by a literary specialist, see Guillory (1994) whose account focuses on the canon rather than the classic. He utilises Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', breaking with traditional Marxist explanations, which focus on the economic interests of a class or class fraction. Cultural capital refers to the implicit power in the language, values and cultural assumptions of a dominant group ensuring its hegemony. On this account, the content of the canon matters less than the fact that there is one and that it works to reproduce an aspect of social order. For a bitter rejoinder to Guillory, see C. Ricks (1989). Smith B. (1988) argues in a similar way to Guillory, that there are no ultimate judgements of value to be had, and the value we attribute to canonical texts is really the outcome of a collective cultural decision. For an excellent response to the one-sidedness of views such as Smith's that subsume the classic into the canon see Weinsheimer (1991: Chapter 6). For a measured judgement on the ubiquity and desirability of canons, see Gorak (1991).

[2] Jeffrey Alexander's (1987) essay provides one of the best accounts of why sociology has classic texts. Connell (1997) in his article takes the discipline to task for uncritically absorbing Marx, Weber, and Durkheim into its canon when their work expresses the ideological assumptions of late nineteenth century colonial Europe. Collins (1997) replied directly to Connell's article. Parker (1997) takes a similarly critical view of the canon as Connell, to which Mouzelis (1997) responded. Marshall and Witz (Eds.) (2004) take the classic authors to task for their 'masculinist' assumptions. How (2007) defends the idea of the sociological classic in Gadamerian terms. The best extensive account of the issue is Peter Baehr (2002).

angle of literary criticism, Harold Bloom (1994) wrote similarly, though more polemically in favour of the literary canon as an unproblematic fixation of all that is great in great literature. Unrelentingly he inveighed against those cultural materialists, feminists and new historicists who would undo the hierarchy of the Western literary canon, based as it is on the timeless virtues of cognitive acuity and aesthetic excellence. He rails against those in what he calls the 'School of Resentment' who historicise or otherwise put context ahead of the artwork. The resulting conflation involves a loss of the distinction between the aesthetic and the social. Such authors, he insists, reduce Shakespeare's plays to being an effect of the 'social energies' of the English Renaissance and are thus unable to distinguish between the creator of Lear, Hamlet, and Iago, and his disciples, John Webster and Thomas Middleton (1994: 3).

For its critics, though, 'canon' is a dubious, prescriptive term, one that represents the insidious privileging of the values of white, Western, middle-class males. Arguing that it is a dusty relic of something 'other people, once powerful have made', many disparage its value, insisting that it should be 'opened up, demystified, or eliminated altogether' (von Hallberg 1984: 1). Functioning in the same exclusionary way that Lyotard (1984) designates Western 'metanarratives', critics claim that canons tacitly affirm the rightness of things as they are, squeezing the possible value of other, non-canonical voices to the margins. Moreover, the fact that threads of religious meaning still cling to the idea of a canon quickly rouses against it the full weight of what Ricoeur (1970: 32–36) called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' an outlook of radical scepticism which zealously seeks the unmasking of tradition in all its guises, and one that has now become the pre-eminent trope of contemporary thought. Unsurprisingly, in this climate the worth of the classic shrinks back. Now shy of affirming its quality, its persistence seems to be sustained only by the inertia of fixed university curricula, which according to Pierre Bourdieu (1988: 100), serve to reproduce the 'habitus' of the 'consecrated professors' and 'oblates' of the 'canonical disciplines' of (French) higher education. Bourdieu's canonical disciplines are French Literature, Classics and Philosophy, rather than

Sociology,[3] but the critical point remains the same: canons function as 'instruments of cultural power, inasmuch as they are an enterprise in the prescription of knowledge and the canonization of the legitimate heritage' (1988: 102).

While Bourdieu's wider ideas are subtler than these polemical quotations might suggest, for critics generally attention shifts from considering whatever inherent merit a classic might have, to assessing how well it affirms or more often fails to live up to what is currently valued. Those who would celebrate its virtues are on the back foot, defensive of something they fear is ending anyway. As a literary figure who affirms the canon, George Steiner (1997: 156) believes he has grasped this sense of an ending 'too late in the day'. He looks back melancholically on a career, which has been devoted to the transcendent qualities of the classic tradition of Western art, declaring that his scholarly work now seems like 'an *in memoriam*, a curatorship of remembrance'. Certainly, if that tradition is dissolving, as he believes, then he has been little more than a museum keeper, pointlessly preserving things against what appears as their inevitable demise. Moreover, if we are witnessing the end of tradition in the way he suggests in the epigram at the head of this chapter, then the classic works of sociology are no less vulnerable to dissolution than are their literary counterparts.

However, over the course of this book I want to challenge Steiner's pessimism by, amongst other things, examining and applying the account of 'the classical' as developed by the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer in his *Truth and Method* (1989). In this, I shall make the case for the likely persistence as well as the desirability of classic texts, rather than for their demise. Gadamer's phenomenological description of classicity (or classicness) embraces both the idea of a text's 'eminence' and its 'historicity', which are the opposing poles in

[3] Instead, Bourdieu locates Sociology alongside other new disciplines such as Ethnology and Linguistics, or peripheral ones such as Assyriology and Egyptology, as disciplines where 'consecrated heretics' may be found. The point is part of his wider argument that higher education is stratified between those who commit to research and are academically successful, and those who are less academically successful but determine courses and syllabuses and are often involved in management and administration. Roughly speaking, the former generate symbolic capital, while the latter possess power. Sociology has its 'consecrated' intellectuals, even though, on his account it lacks the status of being a fully canonical discipline.

the current debate. By 'eminence', I mean the capacity of a classic to stand out from, and be superior to, other texts by virtue of its intrinsic worth and supra-historical qualities; 'eminence' is the key virtue drawn on by defenders of the classic. By 'historicity' I mean the manner in which the effects of history shape a text's meaning, imposing themselves both on the author at the point of creation and on the reader at the point of reception. For critics, these historical effects undermine the very possibility of a classic, because no text can stand above the effects of history. If a text should succeed in becoming a classic, for critics, this is only because it reflects the interests of those sufficiently powerful to buoy it up as part of a canon. Gadamer's account, I argue, opens up an alternative to this binary-opposed way of conceiving the classic, one that exceeds both Bloomian advocacy and Bourdieuian dismissal by revealing the interdependence of these elements as they play out in tradition.

Nevertheless, arguing, as I shall, in favour of the continuing value of the classical, some provisos should be made. There is nothing in this approach that directs the reader to find value in any particular classic text. The worth of a classic is not something to be assumed but something to be found and decided by readers, albeit readers provoked by changing historical horizons. Gadamer's concern is with disclosing the ground for the possibility of classicity, not with the virtues or vices of any specific text. Similarly, while I shall defend the value of the sociology's famous three (Marx, Weber, Durkheim), in no sense should they be regarded in a quasi-sacred fashion as the 'Holy Trinity' of sociological thought. Indeed, it is important for the intellectual health of the discipline to break out of any such straightjacket. The existence of a limited number of classic authors in sociology is neither a reason to neglect the work of other nineteenth century authors nor to ignore the work of contemporaries. The value of any particular classic work must remain open to further consideration. The classic must prove itself over and over again in the arena of intellectual discussion. Hence, the existence of a canon of classic authors that warrants attention should not become an excuse for narrow-minded, exclusionary forms of thought.

The Critique of the 'Classics': First Responses

The debate over classic texts in sociology emerged in the late 1990s,[4] while the dispute over the literary canon is of longer duration, dating from the late 1970s. In literary circles, the issue has received thousands of pages of heated, often acrimonious attention, considerably more than in sociology. This in part may be due the fact that in literary studies the object of analysis is made up of a profusion of classic authors and texts, whereas in sociology the object of analysis is society and the number of classics much more limited. As a result the challenge to the literary canon is a dispute over the very idea of a literary text and thus to the whole of the discipline of literary criticism, whereas the challenge to the sociological canon is a challenge to a small area of the discipline that looks at society through the lens of its classic authors. The difference is widened further, as Baehr (2002: 142–147) rightly points out, by the fact that the publics for the classics in each discipline is different. In sociology there are several publics which consume sociological information, but those designating what shall be thought a classic are the professional academics who estimate the merit of these texts independent of other audiences. Their students may challenge the authority of a classic, indeed I would suggest that most sociology teachers encourage such questioning as a sign of engagement with a classic, but students are in a subordinate position and unlikely to affect matters. On the other hand the literary critical world has a problem that sociology does not; the judgements of academic experts are open to direct challenge by the novel buying public. What experts regard as great literature may not at all be what the wider book-consuming public regard as great in terms of what they buy. As a result there is an important dividing line between what is considered real literature and what is shallow but popular writing. Without this division the literary classic and the culture that supports it would dwindle into insignificance. Unsurprisingly

[4] Putting a precise date on this matter is difficult as there have been discussions about the future of classical sociology that pre-date this period—see Buford Rhea's collection, *The Future of the Sociological Classics* (1981). In addition, the issue over whether sociological classics should be read in a 'presentist' or 'historicist' manner is one that has rumbled on intermittently since the middle 1970s—see Baehr (2002: 98–110). Nevertheless, the more antagonistic, political debates over the validity of the classic as such, are of more recent origin.

then, if literary theory sets about undermining the division and denying there is anything unique about the literary text, the debates that ensue are likely to be more vehement than in sociology as a whole discipline is at stake, indeed a whole aesthetic sensibility. Because of the extensiveness of the literary debate, and the fact that the arguments have often been sociological in character, I shall illustrate the case I want to bring in support of the classic canon, from both sociology and literary theory. Nevertheless, the focus of attention is on the discipline of sociology.

The picture drawn up of the canon by critics in both disciplines is that of a more or less fixed and unified entity, which once established works in a systematic and authoritarian way to reproduce itself. It functions to accept the work and ideas of certain authors while resisting that of others. In challenging the authority of the sociological canon, its critics have argued that far from being pinnacles of intellectual achievement, classic texts conceal a variety of ideological assumptions, tensions, and discontinuities and that their general ambience is at odds with the heterogeneous nature of contemporary experience. As such, canons uncritically pass on from one generation to the next the logocentrism, ethnocentrism, and androcentrism of Western thought (Connell 1997; Deegan 1991, 2003, 2006; Hawthorn 2001; Marshall 2002; Marshall and Witz 2004; Parker 1997; Reed 2006).

For David Parker (1997) and Karen Reed (2006), for example, the sociological canon is parochial to the culture of late nineteenth century Europe. It conceals from view the indifference of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim to issues of contemporary moment, such as gender and ethnicity.[5] This concealment is in part because sociology's classic authors naively reflect the temper of their times and in this are latently sexist or racist. It is also partly, Reed believes, because there are vested academic-political interests, which have sought to sustain a particular, narrow view of the discipline, exemplified in the work of the famous three (2006: 10–12). Either way, for critics, the canon is for the most part a flat reified imposition, one that by implication subsequently imposes its unjust

[5] Interestingly, in relation to the sociological canon, it is the omission of gender and ethnicity, not class, which concerns Reed, whereas critics of the literary canon, such as Guillory and Ohmann, make the class origins of a text responsible for its subsequent canonical status. See the relevant chapters in von Hallberg (1984).

preferences on passive academic audiences. For Reed, the specific problem is twofold. Firstly, the sociological canon consists of authors who are white, male, European and Jewish, the very fact of which is taken to have actively excluded black or female authors. The effect of this, she declares, is to reduce sociological theory to being something 'written by white or Jewish men about white or Jewish men' (2006: 20). Secondly, the work of the canonical authors is focused on socio-economic conditions, something that deflects attention away from issues she believes to be of greater current importance, such as 'identity' in the form of gender and ethnicity (2006: 19ff). These kinds of negative judgements raise problems about the value not only of sociology's classic texts, but also of the nature of the discipline and the worth of its tradition(s), indeed of tradition generally. It is against the diminution of the richness and complexity of these phenomena that much of what follows later in the book is pitched.

If we leave aside the awkward fact that Max Weber was not Jewish, we are still left with the dubious idea that the classic authors imposed a restricted agenda on subsequent sociologists. While ethnicity and gender were not addressed by the famous three,[6] the range of topics they did cover was extraordinarily far-reaching and not recognisable when described as merely 'about white or Jewish men'. One can think of few authors whose academic interests are less parochial than Max Weber's; the range of his work is breath-taking. Stephen Kahlberg (2005: 2) notes the extensiveness of his achievement:

> His empirical studies investigated ancient and medieval China and India, yet also each century of the West's 2,600 year development. He explored, for example, the prophecy of ancient Israel, the medieval origins of Western music, and the salvation doctrines of Buddhism, Hinduism, ancient Judaism, early Christianity, medieval Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvinism. He conducted in-depth research as well on the decline of the Roman Empire, the origins of notions of citizenship in the West, in the cities of the Middle Ages, the accounting practices of medieval trading

[6] Georg Simmel, who seems almost to have joined Marx, Weber, and Durkheim as a classic author, did address the issue of gender. See his *G. Simmel: On Women, Sexuality and Love* (1984); and Coser (1977) and the essay by Gehard in Marshall and Witz (2004).

companies, the caste system in India, and the possibilities for democracy in Russia.

Within the criticism that canons are politically restrictive, there is often an ambiguity as to whether canons should be rejected *tout court* because they are authoritarian, or expanded to accommodate voices and ideas hitherto unheard. Insofar as the canon is thought to restrict our understanding of current issues, as Reed (and Parker) contends the latter is called for. The task as Reed sees it is to expand the canon to include women authors and authors of colour who are of 'sociological interest' (2006: 2). She has in mind from those born in the nineteenth century: Anna Julia Cooper, Harriet Matineau, and W.E.B. Du Bois and from the twentieth century: Hannah Arendt, Franz Fanon, and Simone de Beauvoir. While these are subtle and convincing authors in many ways, there is something problematic about selecting any author primarily because of his or her gender or ethnic identity. It implies that knowledge has no autonomy from its origins in a particular author's embodied life and is in fact determined by it. Beyond this, however, widening the canon to include authors who will satisfy contemporary values will not solve the problem of exclusion as conceived by critics such as Reed. Every new inclusion involves a decision to privilege the ideas of one author over those of others and thus will necessarily involve further exclusions.

Underlying this kind of critique is the problem of the social unrepresentativeness of the canon. The critique is based on the idea that there is a homology between two processes of exclusion: the process of social exclusion that takes place in society involving subordinate groups being excluded from the exercise of power or political representation; and the academic process of making some authors part of the canon while excluding others. A solution to the latter problem is in one sense quite simple—open it up to a greater variety of authors (Guillory (1994: 7)). To some extent in sociology this has happened, albeit on intellectual rather than the 'representativeness' grounds argued for by critics. William Outhwaite (2009) suggests that the sociology canon in the UK at least, now includes Bauman, Beck, Bourdieu, and Giddens, with Foucault and Habermas sitting in the wings as influential non-sociologists. And in some collections of classical sociology there are now essays by authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and

W.E.B. Du Bois (see Edles and Appelrouth 2010). However, this 'opening up' of the canon does nothing to rectify the democratic shortfall in wider society upon which the critique of the canon depends. This is unsurprising as the site of canon formation is the university, while the sites of wider injustice are to be found in other societal institutions. It may be, as John Guillory (1994: 7–8) observes, the political desire to open up the canon and make it a mirror image of social diversity is 'manifestly a politics of the image'. In a society where the effects of postmodernist thought are apparent a 'culture of appearances' produces a strong need to *appear* blameless, a need that overrides academic considerations.

Moreover, the reason for choosing one particular author rather than another is not always as clear as it seems. While it is easy to see the failings in past historical horizons when we judge them against our current ideals, it is much more difficult to recognise the way current ideals are unwittingly conditioned by the limits of present horizons. For example, the 'cultural turn' in sociology that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, rejected the use of positivist epistemologies and their link to structural determinism, instead emphasising the centrality of cultural meaning, identifying society in 'textual' rather than empirical terms. This horizon switch had the result of allowing 'culture' to eclipse 'society' as the main focus of sociology and to produce an agenda for what Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner (2000) called 'decorative sociology'. The effects can be seen in Parker and Reed's concerns with the cultural injustices of gender and ethnicity, but not with social class. In this they reflect the fact that contemporary sociology has shifted its focus away from matters of inequality (class) and towards matters of cultural identity (difference). This has happened in spite of the fact that the gap between the rich and poor, in the UK and elsewhere, has expanded not contracted in the last forty years (Piketty 2014).[7] While it may be inevitable that we know ourselves less well than we think, there is an implication that we should exercise a degree of modesty in the appraisal of past horizons, lest we naively assume the automatic superiority of the present over what went before.

[7] Piketty makes the point that while there was a reduction in the gap in the 1950s and 1960s the trend across longer time spans remains much as Marx described: increasingly wide.

It is also, I think, problematic to suggest that for a text to be canonical in sociology it is sufficient for it to be merely 'sociologically interesting' as Reed maintains. Such a vague criterion means that almost anything concerned with the social world could become a sociological classic. Whilst this view seems commendably democratic, it begs the question as to whether sociology has a specific identity of its own, with characteristics that are exemplified in its classic texts. This is not to say that authors whose work falls outside sociology are not relevant to the way the discipline understands itself and goes about its business, indeed, the importance of the part played by Gadamer's hermeneutics in this book will become clear in later chapters. It is rather to say that in providing the vocabulary and general grammar of sociology, sociology's classics are what enable us to think and speak sociologically. They have furnished us with the core pathways of thought which will open up almost any area to sociological analysis. In this, they are a timely reminder of what the lineaments of the discipline are at a point when the centrifugal forces leading to its fragmentation and possible dissolution are at their most potent. It is to this issue of sociology's identity in rapidly changing times, and its narrow and diminishing vision of the past, including its classics, that I will turn to in Chaps. 3, 4, and 5.

Summary and Conclusion

Over recent decades, it has become a matter of dispute whether classic texts in sociology and literary studies should continue to be recognised as pinnacles of intellectual and artistic excellence, or demoted to a more mundane status. From this, two broad outlooks have emerged. There is first, what might be called an 'internalist' view, which supports the classic as something worth defending because of its inherently superior qualities. Secondly, and in opposition to this, there is an 'externalist' view, where the task is to demystify the pretensions of classic texts to superiority by discrediting their claims to having inherent qualities. Instead, 'externalists' seek explanations for the status of classic texts in terms of their external cultural milieu.

The hostility to the classic of the 'externalist' view has taken various theoretical forms and these forms have been applied in different combinations: social constructionism; empirical sociology; feminism; post-structuralism; deconstructionism, and, more broadly, postmodernism. While each of these has different reasons for opposing the classic text, they share a common a view that it, no less than any other artefact, is the product of the (ideological) conditions from which it emerged, and as such deserves no special respect. To assume that it warrants greater consideration because it is part of a canon of highly esteemed texts regularly receiving deferential treatment, is misleading. For 'externalists' this assumption naively places the classic text 'above' the historical context from which it emerged, rather than correctly seeing it as the product of that context. In doing this, critics argue, we bestow on the classic a spurious, quasi-sacred status, which misguidedly evokes the reverential attitude we might expect of readers of a religious canon.

In contrast, 'internalists' defend the classic on the grounds that what makes it remarkable is being able to illuminate things for audiences far removed in time, place and sensibility from the original one. The classic text stands out from other texts, 'internalists' argue, because its intrinsic virtues give voice to matters of continuing significance. As a result, it can be endlessly re-interpreted for new situations by subsequent generations. Implicit in the defence of the classic is a highlighting of the experience that most readers have of finding some texts more illuminating than others because they offer greater insight into the subject matter than the lesser text. The ability of an ordinary reader to distinguish a more from a less enlightening text means that explanations based on external context inevitably mean losing sight of the specific value of that particular text. In short, it results in reductionism.

While the opposition between these two views can appear intractable, one aim of this book is to draw up a case that overcomes it. Gadamer's account of the classical offers this possibility. However, while I want to defend the idea of the classic text in general and its role in sociology in particular, I do not want to defend it defensively. Rather, the aim is to affirm its intellectual value both as providing sociological knowledge, and in terms of its strategic importance in cementing together an otherwise diverse and often fragmented discipline.

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Section 2

The Wider Context: The Past, the Classic, and the Identity of Sociology

3

In Pursuit of Identity: Fragmentation, Conflict and Crisis

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.

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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

[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

[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 socologique* 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

[4] The 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).

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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 smokescreen 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

1987: 11–57). 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).[7] 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),[8] who wanted to disown the field and gradually dispense with the classics.[9] 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

[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.[10] 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

[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

[11] I 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 apace and become the pre-eminent outlook in sociology.[12] 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.

[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.

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4

On the Antipathy of Sociology to the Past

Introduction

In the last chapter attention was drawn to the way sociology developed two different identities as it emerged from the tangled threads of late nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectual history. These identities, the scientific and the humanistic, viewed the classic text differently. For scientific sociology, the classic belonged with the discipline's pre-scientific condition and would become redundant when sociology came of age as a science. An alternative, broadly humanistic sociology was initially more sympathetic to its classic texts, but with the rise to prominence of the social constructionist thesis within the broad church of a postempiricist sociology, classics became as vulnerable as any other artefact to its iconoclastic aims. It was argued that while scientific and humanistic outlooks have had different reasons for diminishing the significance of the classics they share in common an attitude that valorises the present at the expense of the past.

In this chapter I want to examine some of the ways sociology has expressed its antipathy to the past. In many cases the opposition is not explicit but springs from a general sense that loyalty to the past is an

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irrational habit of mind and thus something best discarded. It has entered sociology at different times, in different ways and at different levels. All three of its intellectual founders, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, had a conception of traditional society which anticipated its replacement by something more rational and modern. The basic parameters of mainstream outlooks such as empirical sociology, structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism can be seen to have sidelined the past, while more contemporary writers such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens similarly echo this occlusion in their accounts of reflexivity, structuration, and the detraditionalisation of society.

Tradition as Habit

One suspects that sociology's reluctance to recognise the continued existence of the past in the present derives from its intellectual heritage, which goes back beyond the nineteenth century to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, sociology has looked on tradition with suspicion. For Enlightenment thinkers, tradition was associated with the superstitions of the past and thus as something that stood in the way of the desirable changes rational thought could bring. Indeed, the prejudice against pastness is often virtually invisible because it has become part of what we now assume to be rational. If the task of sociology is, in the spirit of Enlightenment, to bring rational (scientific) thought to bear on human affairs, then focusing on the present, not the past, seems to be a precondition for social progress. The effects of tradition are then necessarily experienced as mystifications, things that hinder change and produce in us an automatically sceptical attitude towards the outlooks of the past. To the extent that sociology identifies itself as socially progressive, tradition becomes something its practitioners would wish to see diminished.

Even Max Weber (1978 (1): 25, 36), who was no simple advocate of the progressivist impulse in Western reason, identified traditional action as being at the limit of what could be called 'meaningful action' at all—and in fact believed it was often beyond it. It lacked meaningfulness because it was based on habit and thus was insufficiently reflective. He described

such action as 'a matter of almost automatic reaction to the habitual stimuli which guide behaviour in a course that has been repeatedly followed'. It is thought valid only because 'it is that which has always been'. For Weber, traditional action was ingrained habitual action and involved an automatic adherence to what had gone before. He contrasted this most sharply with rational, calculative action[1] (*zwekrationalität*), an outlook oriented towards the conscious achievement of a goal, and regarded this form of action as increasingly characteristic of modern societies. It has to be said though, that while implicitly regarding the latter type of action as the most rational, he was equally aware that 'the great bulk of all everyday action' was closer to the traditional type and was certainly not sociologically irrelevant. One has only to remember the significance he attributed to traditional Protestant habits of mind as they informed the spirit of modern capitalism to realise the importance of habit in his sociology. In fact, he noted that even modern rational action would in time become habitual and thus turn into traditional action.

Nevertheless, sociology has continued to have a blind spot when it comes to the possible richness of tradition. With a few exceptions,[2] the idea that tradition might be a fertile source of new insight rather than the unthinking repetition of the past has for the most part remained anathema. The reluctance of sociology to acknowledge the importance of tradition shows itself in various ways. Camic (1986) has provided the most comprehensive argument to say that while the concept of 'habit', and by extension 'tradition', were central background factors in the work of Weber and Durkheim, these concepts have since fallen out of favour. The classic authors, he argues, recognised that such concepts referred to crucial elements in the ability of any society to sustain itself in a coherent way and thus were vital to sociological explanations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sociology, in viewing Weber and Durkheim through the contemporary

[1] Weber's typology of action is more complicated than this; it includes not only traditional and instrumental action but also affectual and value rational action.

[2] Apart from Gadamer's philosophical account in *Truth and Method* (1989: 265–307), Edward Shils' *Tradition* (1981) and John B. Thompson's 'The Re-mooring of Tradition' in his *The Media and Modernity* (1995), provide the most interesting sociological accounts. A shorter version of Thompson's essay can be found in the collection edited by Heelas et al. (1996), which also contains essays orientated towards its title: *Detraditionalization*. This collection contains essays sympathetic to the importance of tradition, by Adam, Campbell, and Luke.

prism of 'reflexivity', has either downplayed or ignored the possible significance of habit and tradition for an understanding of all societies.

The origins of this myopia, Camic believes, lies in the interdisciplinary rivalry between sociology and the then 'new psychology' in the two decades after 1918 particularly in the USA.[3] Seeking to draw the kudos of natural science towards it, psychology adopted a model of habit developed in nineteenth century biology and physiology, where the emphasis was on the unreflective, biomechanical nature of habit. Experiments on headless chickens and decapitated frogs confirmed that habit involved no more than simple non-conscious motor responses to stimuli. This conceptualisation informed psychology as it grew to institutional respectability in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So thorough was its adoption that John Watson, the first full Professor of psychology at Johns Hopkins University and sometime President of the American Psychological Association, actually declared that thought itself was no more than 'the tongue, throat and laryngeal muscles… moving in habitual trains' (Camic 1986: 1050, 1068)

It was not that sociology was instantly opposed to the biologistic view of habit, Charles Cooley, W.I. Thomas, and Robert Park can all be found initially approving the idea. Rather, because sociology was less institutionally developed than psychology, it felt an increasing need to assert its independence by resisting the concepts colonised by a competitor discipline. To the extent that psychology had taken over the terrain of 'habit' sociology turned against it. W.I. Thomas was the first to reverse his earlier ideas and challenge the behaviourist model, declaring that habit should be restricted to the biological field as 'the uniformity of behaviour' that makes up social life is not an organic habit but a uniformity 'of consciously followed rules' (Camic 1986: 1072). While we might now applaud this rejection of the behaviourist model of habit, it had the effect of sweeping away all reference to habit and tradition in the social world

[3] Camic's account of habit in sociology focuses on the USA where the discipline was gradually being institutionalised in the late nineteenth century, albeit in a fairly fragmented way. In Britain, apart from the The London School of Economics (LSE) and a few minor exceptions, sociology did not seriously enter mainstream university life until the early 1960s.

as it was the only model available at the time.[4] The negative association of tradition with habit and habit with nothing more sophisticated than the biophysical responses of simple organisms, meant that the full complexity of 'habit' and 'tradition' disappeared from the sociological imagination. If tradition involved no more than simple, knee-jerk reactions, then its wider importance as a concept was swept from sociological view. Thus tradition, encompassing as it does those vast modern stocks of sophisticated knowledge in the spheres of science, art, and morality, has until recently been strikingly absent from the sociological agenda.[5]

Camic's case is generally convincing, if slightly overstated. Certainly, like tradition, habit has received little attention in sociology, though more than he suggests. It puts in intermittent appearances often in an oblique form as something else, such as the preconscious assumptions of the 'life-world' (Habermas), 'first order typifications' (Schutz), or 'ethnomethodological glossing' (Garfinkel), but little in a direct or sustained way. One notable exception is the work of Bourdieu (1977) which has been influential in raising the idea of 'habit' as something sociologically important. It is related to his concept of 'habitus' by which he means the set of acquired dispositions which underpin the collective life of a social class, where such dispositions are transposable between different structural contexts. In seeing behaviour habituated around these more or less flexible dispositions, he seeks to avoid the familiar problems of having to choose between social action as either the outcome of structural forces, or the product of actors' reflexive intentions. In fact he deliberately chooses the word 'habitus' over 'habit' because he thinks the latter is too mechanistic, and because he wants to emphasise the 'generative (if not creative) capacity inscribed in the system of dispositions as an *art*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 122). However, his overall focus is not as one might expect, on actors acquiring the dispositions they generated through their

[4] Ravaisson's *De l'abitude* to which I refer later, offered a very different view of habit and had been written in 1838, but has not come to the attention of the social scientific community until recently.

[5] Over the years, Weber's work on the rationalisation and ensuing 'disenchantment' of the western world has received greatest attention. However, it is with Habermas' re-working of Weber's claims in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, volume 1, section 2), that the wider sociological importance of the Weberian view of the emergent differentiation of the spheres of science, art, and morality becomes apparent.

action, but of how a habitus (or system of habits) structures their inner lives in service of the wider structures of the social world.

More broadly, interpretive sociology has focused on the importance of habit in the rituals and routines underpinning everyday life. There are also other authors outside the interpretive tradition who have had a concern for the importance of habit, albeit in finding ways of challenging what they see as its stifling effects on everyday life (de Certeau 1984; Debord 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1988). However a recent exception, closer to the view of habit I want to develop, is that of Crossley (1995, 2001, 2013), who takes the phenomenological ideas of Merleau-Ponty (2012: 143–148) and Ricoeur (2007: 280ff) on habit to show its positive value to a sense of the embodied nature of human action.

It could be argued, along with Weber, that all societies rely on habitual behaviour to maintain and reproduce their structural organisation; however this view still sees habit as only a necessary evil. The underlying perception of habit as essentially negative remains the preponderant view even for many of the authors above. Mostly, 'habit' speaks of automatous responses, of blindly followed routines and thus the enervation of the spirit. Habit is seen as the opposite of creativity, of spontaneity, or authentic thought and action. It stands in opposition to our sense of human agency as something active and creative. Yet this negative view of habit (and tradition) is not the only one possible, nor I believe is it the right one. Habit is also the source of many of the most sophisticated human capacities. The ability to read or write, to play a musical instrument, to drive a car, or use an iPhone requires that complex skills become second nature. Only when these skills have become matters of habit can they really flourish. As Ricoeur once put it, 'to acquire a habit does not mean to repeat and consolidate but to invent, to progress' (2007: 289). Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of the social world being developed over time without allowing for the fact that humans inevitably routinise their complex behaviours enabling some to develop as traditions. The recent translation of Ravaisson's 1838 book *Of Habit* (2008) provides an opportunity for the Anglophone reader to re-think the concept of habit along more positive lines, arguing that habit is the foundation of both continuity and change. It is a line of argument I will subsequently elaborate in relation to tradition as the ground for the classic text.

This is not to say that the habits of everyday life and tradition are exactly the same thing. Habits are those elements of behaviour to which we have become accustomed and of which we are relatively unaware. They may be shared tacitly by others, but they relate primarily to the actor's frame of reference. Traditions, on the other hand, reach beyond the personal, and have a wider remit. They may also have an overt normative role to play in the lifeworld, and be embedded in institutional life (Campbell 1996: 161–162). Nevertheless, the two are related in that traditions are primarily constituted by habits and together they provide the shared, mostly pre-reflective fabric for social integration stretched across time.

The Thinning Down of Tradition

Instead of being concerned with the richer possibilities of tradition, sociology has largely viewed the past through the lens of how it *imposes* itself on the present. This is apparent in the way the discipline deals with the continuity of society. A standard concept in all introductory sociology courses is 'socialisation'. It refers to the passing on of norms and values from one generation to the next, and involves the modification of the individual's behaviour to conform to societal expectations. Yet described in this rather flat, mechanical way, as something that is passed on only from one generation to the next to ensure conformity, does not address the full significance of what tradition is. For example, for a tradition to be a tradition it must involve more than one transmission. At least two transmissions linking three generations are a minimum requirement, otherwise what gets passed on will only appear to involve the living, which would mean that the contents of a tradition would be indistinguishable from the contents of any other part of life. At its upper time limit tradition will have a sense of carrying something worthwhile forward across a span of hundreds if not thousands of years. In sociology, tradition has remained a residual category, where the focus has been on particular parts of it such as class, gender, or ethnicity and how they function negatively in shaping the behaviour of actors in the present. In the process the wider value of tradition is made invisible. Shils (1981: 9) noted the way

sociology appears to have included tradition but has actually truncated it both vertically and horizontally in the way it conceives socialisation:

> Thus, the study of a part of tradition has been to some extent incorporated into contemporary social science; it is that part which appears in the process of acquisition, thinned down and reduced in content and narrowly confined to the relations of one generation to another. Those bits of tradition in the process of "socialization" or of "assimilation" are not seen as a larger pattern of interconnected parts.

The institutionalisation of sociology in higher education after the Second World War also played a part in the discipline's primary focus on the present. The reformist spirit of the immediate postwar period in Britain informed much of the sociology undertaken at the time, emerging as it did from the London School of Economics and Political Science. The desire to reform society by highlighting the importance of egalitarian political policies for Britain's future was a clear motive for these early sociologists (Halsey 2004: 84–85). The French sociologist, Raymond Aron, who was visiting Britain in 1960, is reported to have exclaimed, 'the trouble is that British sociology is essentially an attempt to make intellectual sense of the problems of the Labour Party' (Halsey 2004: 71).

The wish by these sociologists to see the social hierarchies and inequalities of traditional British life transformed along egalitarian lines, was coupled with another factor equally at odds with tradition: science. Sociology sought academic legitimacy through its aspiration to become a 'science of society'. In order to do this it had to free itself from any sentimental attachment to matters other than the facts as they presented themselves. Concepts had to be chosen on the basis that they could be 'operationalised', which meant they had to correspond to observable facts in such a way that allowed them to be measured and those measurements repeated. If concepts could not be operationalised like this, whatever they might refer to fell outside the purview of scientific sociology as part of a hinterland of unprovable ideas. The desire to be scientific necessarily involved scepticism towards any view that challenged the 'given-ness' of the facts. The prevalence of this empiricist outlook meant that the facts of the present situation became the benchmark for truth in sociological

explanation. The idea that the historical context or tradition out of which the meaning of the facts emerged should play a part was absent from this outlook.[6]

There were countercurrents that emerged subsequently, which challenged this positivist orthodoxy. In developing a critical theory of society, Herbert Marcuse (1973: 145) observed that 'the real field of knowledge is not the given facts about things as they are, but the critical evaluation of them as a prelude to passing beyond their given form', that is, a concern with what they might become. Nevertheless, despite their opposition to empiricism, Frankfurt School authors, such as Marcuse, were generally unsympathetic to tradition, albeit in a nuanced way.[7] Like their positivist opponents, they saw in tradition mainly dogmatic authority and thus something to be overcome. It was in the development of second-generation Critical Theory by Jürgen Habermas that the opposition to tradition became explicit. In his famous debate with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Habermas challenged the importance Gadamer attributed to tradition, insisting that the task for Critical Theory was to breach the authority of tradition and dissolve its prejudices through reflection. Like those of his predecessors, Habermas' ambitions for Critical Theory were future orientated. They involved seeking emancipation from the past in order to open up the future, not a reconsideration of the significance of the past.[8] Interestingly, despite their differences the claims of both empiricist sociology and Habermasian Critical Theory coincide at one point. Both, in some degree anticipate modern society moving towards a state of

[6] The most copious, (if abstract) critique of these positivist assumptions is to be found in Habermas' essay 'Analytical Theory of Science and Dialectics', which was a contribution to what became known as the positivist dispute in German sociology (Adorno et al. 1976). It focused on the contrasting ideas of Popper and Adorno as they bore on the philosophy of science and social science. In support of Adorno, Habermas compares the limitations of the methodological principles of a scientific sociology with the dialectical approach of Critical Theory.

[7] Historically speaking, for example, they recognised that the emergence of the 'empiricist' tradition had undermined earlier metaphysical forms of thought, but history had rendered that tradition anti-progressive because of its emphasis on the 'given-ness' of facts tending to reinforce the current status quo. See Horkheimer's seminal essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (1972).

[8] Details of this debate, including its intellectual background can be found in How's *The Habermas—Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social* (1995); see page 101–102 for details of the central texts.

traditionlessness. More ironic still is the fact that this traditionless condition is the one that postmodernist authors, such as Baudrillard, believe is already upon us, and neither side has much sympathy for his work.

Sociology and the Absence of the Past

Successor outlooks in mainstream sociology have been no more receptive to the role of 'pastness' than either the empiricism of the 1950s and early 1960s or the Critical Theory of Marcuse and Habermas. There was certainly an awareness that a lack of 'pastness' represented a flaw in the overall adequacy of the discipline, but no clear-cut solution was forthcoming. It became a critical truism, for example, that Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism relied on an atemporal conception of social structure, which belied the temporal quality of social life. With some exasperation, Herminio Martins (1974: 246) captures the repetitive nature of this criticism:

> It has been stated *ad nauseam* that functionalism 'fails to take time seriously'. It is claimed that this failure is necessary not contingent. For inherent, deep-seated fundamental reasons—metaphysical and methodological, cognitive and extra-cognitive (ethico-political, ideological)—functionalism is/was bound to de-emphasise and/or be unable to render theoretically intelligible becoming, process, diachrony, history. Rather, its whole 'spirit' and 'vision' of the world, and the analytical tools it elaborated, systematically, irrevocably or pre-eminently directed its problem-interests and cognitive powers (if any) towards being, structure, order, synchrony, equilibrium states and equilibrial mechanisms.

The argument went that functionalism might be able to explain change *within* a system of (atemporal) structures as they work to re-establish the equilibrium of that system, but it could not account for a change of *system*. Martins' irritation stems from the fact that despite the voluminous criticism functionalism received, its successors have done no better in resolving the problem of how to incorporate a temporal dimension into sociology.

Certainly one might have expected that the resurgent interpretative sociologies of the late 1960s and early 1970s would have fared better in solving the problem of the absent 'tradition'. Given their opposition to functionalist explanations, and their focus on the human subject with its capacity to experience temporal matters, they were well placed to have dealt with the issue of 'pastness'. It did receive attention in a special issue of *The British Journal of Sociology* in 1976, which was devoted to 'History and Sociology'. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of the interpretative tradition in sociology, especially symbolic interactionism, Paul Rock addressed the issue in his, 'Some problems of interpretative historiography' (1976: 353–369). He sought to add the dimension of 'pastness' to sociology by following broadly phenomenological principles, but ended up making the connection more elusive than ever.

He argued that in the same way an interpretative (sociological) understanding of the present must be based in the lived experience of actors, so also it must be with history writing. Any treatment of the reality of large or small historical events is subject to the same criterion, because even in history writing such treatment is

> …no more than an imploded discussion of that reality. It receives its animation and intelligibility from its accounts of typical motives and courses of action. Without these accounts, it has no discernible anchorage. It becomes, instead, devoid of any demonstrable connection with the social life it purports to describe. A construct such as class conflict, mercantilism, war or crisis, may have an analytic usefulness for the historian…Yet it cannot be taken to have an autonomous existence outside its realisation in men's experience. (1976: 354)

The problem is that when writing history the researcher no longer has access to men's *(sic)* experience, because those who were involved are dead. The historian cannot enter their social milieu, nor question them to monitor and revise the initial historical judgements into accuracy. There can be no 'participant observation' and thus no assessment in matters of appearance or of physical gesture, no evaluation of the tone of things said or of the verbal expressions used. For Rock, because we can assume no common inter-subjective world linking past and present we are faced

with insurmountable problems. In the vocabulary of Alfred Schutz, the sociologist, like any social actor, relies on building up 'typifications' of the social world in the process of constituting it. While the sociologist may produce second order 'typifications' (concepts), which must be carefully related to the first-order ones produced by the actors themselves, when dealing with the past we are faced with something much more complex: typifications of typifications of typifications, almost *ad infinitum*. Rock (1976: 354–355) expresses the problem like this:

> The dead are known mediately, by means of typifications, which are derivative, inferential and speculative. They are re-assembled without any assurance that they or the worlds they populated conform to anything the historian has himself *(sic)* directly experienced. [ ] Although they (the historian's ideal-types or typifications) may appear to have some intelligibility, it is a conjectural and problematic intelligibility that may be held to proceed from the historian's own common-sense understanding and not from any appreciation of the actor's world.

Rock acknowledges the efforts of authors such as Cicourel to show that there is a 'tolerable variance' of meaning across time, but still regards it as unclear whether, for example the 'mob' of the eighteenth century signified much the same as the 'mob' of the twentieth century (1976: 364). He does recognise that there is a pragmatic, common-sense defence of the intelligibility of the past, which says that things from the past do *appear* to make sense. They do *seem* to be understandable, and 'do not read, in the main, as if they were the product of an alien intelligence'. Nevertheless, such an argument is, he rues, merely 'the last-ditch of the phenomenological defence', based on an 'ultimate act of faith' (1976: 365). For Rock, the past is, as the saying goes, a foreign country; they do things differently there.[9]

Another possible way of ameliorating the gap between past and present, Rock suggests, would be to follow Simmel's recommendation that the otherness of the past be given special reflexive emphasis. Nevertheless, in the end he finds this idea no more compelling than any other. We

[9] The saying originates in L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between,* in which it is the opening sentence.

cannot know *a priori* whether the dead worlds of the past really are 'other' to us. It may be that the past is not alien; it may be entirely at one with the present, in which case the imaginative effort to recreate it reflexively, as something distinctly different, distorts it. The problem is we do not know, and on Rock's account cannot know, if the past is different, or if different how different it is from the present.

The issue of 'pastness' as Rock poses it is a version of a wider difficulty that regularly resurfaces in sociology. It is the dilemma of how far an analysis can reasonably move beyond the actors' own conceptions of what is going on and still claim to be about what those actors are doing in that particular situation. Once epistemological primacy is bestowed on the actors involved, then the imposition of another framework necessarily becomes problematic. Certainly, Rock *wants* to recognise the presence of the past in the here-and-now and believes that the present alone contains insufficient matter for an adequate understanding of social life. He has no doubt also that sociology would be enhanced if society's 'vanished forms are reassembled', and dryly concludes that the present does not mysteriously appear without a past (1976: 368). Yet the implication of the account defeats its ambition. In unwittingly committing to the pursuit of a fleeting and ever elusive present, (interpretative) sociology can never find the past in the present, nor thereby attribute any significance to tradition.

I disagree with Rock's approach to temporality, based as it is on the ultimate centrality of a momentary, ineffable 'present' supposedly experienced by actors. Of necessity this negates the past and with it the significance of tradition. I shall not pursue the problems attaching to this outlook further at this point, but later address what I see as a more adequate hermeneutic account of both. I have dwelt on Rock's essay because of the unflinching honesty with which he pursues the matter of the past in relation to interpretative sociology, at least as it was in 1975. With its focus on the transient co-presence of actors, it highlights the way interpretative sociology foreshortens any attempt to grasp the past in the way it privileges the immediacy of the 'present'. In this, if nothing else it shares common ground with its atemporal, macro-sociological counterpart: structural functionalism.

Tradition as Repression

There are other less tangible but no less powerful reasons for an academic discipline to find tradition inimical to its own latent values. The origins of such reasons lie in a wider modern mentality where the past is invariably felt to be in error because it is at odds with the truths of the modern world. The Enlightenment certainly played a part in establishing tradition as something that runs counter to 'reason', but there is a more affective, moral dimension to this as well, where tradition is seen as not only irrational but also repressive.

Some of the most trenchant critiques of tradition as something repressive come from Marxism, which of course is a redoubtable tradition in its own right. Marx bequeathed the idea that while human beings have the capacity to act freely and create their future 'history', they are held back from this possibility by the conditions they inherit from the past. On the opening page of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* he famously remarked that

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Marx 1972: 10)

While this description of tradition as weighing like a nightmare on the living clearly sets the 'repression' context for Marxist accounts generally, Marx goes on to note that tradition is still important for revolutionaries, though only for strategic purposes. At certain times tradition becomes a source of revolutionary inspiration. In revolutionary situations, the ghostly heroes of the past may be called up by revolutionary leaders to legitimise their search for a new order. Martin Luther 'put on the mask of the Apostle Paul', the French Revolution of 1789 'draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire' (Marx 1972: 10). Conjuring up spirits from the past, borrowing their names, costumes and battle slogans, enables the revolutionaries to heighten the validity of their claims to be renewing something that has been lost. For Marx, it

keeps revolutionary passions high, but only to conceal from both the people and the leaders the fact that eventually there will be a break with the past and no need to refer back to tradition.

For Marx, (at least the young Marx) the existence of tradition is an expression of the fact that the human species-being, like the being of other species, continues to be embedded in nature (*Naturwüchsiqkeit*—see Shapiro 1977). It is only when the complex of exploitative material conditions into which humans are inserted at birth, are transcended, that the species will no longer be coextensive with blind nature and realise its potential for rational behaviour. Only in this state of postembeddedness will the past cease to dominate the present and humans start to create a history of their own making in the process of true species self-formation.

Although Marx is writing of this in the in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is still assumed that traditional values hold us back because they express an altogether unemancipated view of the world. Crucial not only to Marxists but also to many other sociologists is the assumption that the human subject has an inner potential awaiting fulfilment, which will happen when he or she is emancipated from tradition. Being deferential towards the past or obliging others to be so, involves repressing human possibility and denying that key contemporary 'right': the right to self-expression. It implies that those who defer to what has preceded them are subject to a kind moral weakness in which the capacity for self-development has been cramped to the point of self-denial.

Another author who addressed the fear of being encumbered by the past in a particularly visceral way was Sartre. He was a philosopher who has received little direct attention in sociology, in part because his most famous work, *Being and Nothingness* (1972) speaks the language of ontology, not sociology. Nevertheless, his emphasis on consciousness and its relation to the fundamental human capacity for freedom has deservedly made some impression on sociological outlooks where the importance of emancipation plays a part.[10] He divides everything that is (Being),

[10] Perhaps the most successful development has been in feminist sociology via Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1957), which drew on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* for its basic categories. De Beauvoir pointed out that women experienced the world in 'male' terms, which defined them as close to nature and thus lacking the transcending consciousness that Sartre puts at the heart of a human (though implicitly 'male') freedom. De Beauvoir's work is echoed in that of others such as

into two (ontological) categories: being-for-itself and being-in-itself. Being-for-itself refers to consciousness and its capacity to transcend the 'given' world by negating it. This idea is echoed in sociology in Giddens' definition of human agency that 'whenever we speak of human action, we imply the possibility the agent "could have done otherwise"' (1984b: 223), meaning that what defines human being is the capacity for refusal, for saying 'no' to being determined by external forces. Being-in-itself, on the other hand is everything that is not consciousness, such as physical objects, economic forces, the weather, the past, and so forth. The freedom of the subject lies in its *consciousness*, which obliges it to recognise itself as distinct from, and no mere effect of the mechanical laws of nature or society. The binary opposition Sartre sets up between an untrammelled, spontaneous 'for-itself' and an inert, undifferentiated 'in-itself' leads him to see the past in dramatically oppressive terms. He amplifies the physical element found in everyday sayings such as the 'weight of the past' or 'the dead hand of tradition' by talking about the past being *slimy*, and how it irresistibly draws consciousness back into its clutches, dissolving its projective quality like a poisonous sea creature:

> A consciousness that became slimy would be transformed by the thick stickiness of its ideas. From the time of our upsurge into the world, we are haunted by the image of a consciousness which would like to launch forth into the future, toward a projection of self, and at the very moment it was conscious of arriving there would be slyly held back by the invisible suction of the past and would have to assist in its own slow dissolution in this past which it was fleeing, would have to aid in the invasion of its project by a thousand parasites until finally it completely lost itself. (Sartre 1972: 610)

On this account, the horror of the past is the horror of the slimy. It expresses a fear that we, as conscious beings, might at any moment slide back into the sticky inertia of nature's 'in-itself'. The fear that consciousness might suddenly falter, lose its will, its direction, its freedom, and

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Griffin (1978), Smith (1988), and Bartsky (1992). Craib's *Existentialism and Sociology: A Study of Jean Paul Sartre* (1976) opened up the interface between Sartre's overall philosophical outlook and sociology, though this line of thought has not been pursued by others.

return to a state of blind nature generates the queasiness at the heart of Sartre's novel: *Nausea*.

Late Modernity, Structuration and the Occlusion of Tradition

Though the tone is different, running parallel to these ideas in recent sociological literature are accounts of the emergence of a new, increasingly autonomous, late-modern subject. According to Beck (1992: 127–138) and Giddens (1991: 70–108), this subject has successfully emerged, at least as an ideal-type,[11] from beneath the baleful effects of tradition, and society is now moving towards a de-traditionalised condition. In this post-traditional society, the newly emergent subject has an acute sense of its importance and is in possession of a powerful 'reflexive self' that continuously seeks fulfilment.[12] Beck and Giddens acknowledge that neither 'individuality' nor 'selfhood' are recent inventions, having existed in various forms in pre-modern Europe and elsewhere. Nevertheless, they claim there is now something distinctive about these phenomena: both are imbued with a new hyper-reflexivity. It is not clear whether this reflexivity really is new or an amplification of what has always been inherent in human nature. However, they argue that it now reaches into virtually all aspects of contemporary life and leads to the kind of questioning of everything that puts the viability of any tradition seriously in doubt (Giddens 1991: 206–207).

For these authors, social structures as determinants of social life in the late-modern world have receded in importance even if they have not completely disappeared. The diminishing importance of social structure

[11] Some empirical evidence is adduced by Beck in *Risk Society* (1992) to the effect that traditional sociological categories such as class and gender have declined as sources of identity and he assumes that this obliges the contemporary subject to live a more reflexive life. In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens' argument is largely speculative, concerned to build up an ideal-typical picture of the contemporary hyper-reflexive subject.

[12] There are differences in emphasis between Beck and Giddens; the latter focuses on a new kind of reflexivity as a characteristic of the human agent, where Beck talks of 'reflexive modernisation' in terms of institutions. In this, Beck's account is problematic. It is unclear how institutions in themselves can be reflexive, when only agents have the power of reflexivity.

enables the reflexive subject to escape the expectations of tradition in relation to class, family, gender, and so forth. Hence, Beck notes, we can no longer predict what an individual's outlook is like according to traditional sociological categories:

> People with the same income level, or put in the old-fashioned way, within the same 'class', can or even must choose between different lifestyles, subcultures, social ties and identities. From knowing one's class position one can no longer determine one's personal outlook, relations, family position, social and political ideas or identity. (Beck 1992: 131)

On this account social life is a much more unpredictable, open-ended affair than it used to be, an effect of which is to throw individuals back onto themselves to create the meaning and identity necessary for their lives. Ironically, while this appears to be a process through which individuals find emancipation through self-development, more harshly it also means that they now 'have no choice but to choose a lifestyle' (Giddens: 1991: 81). The erosion of tradition as a source of identity means people now *have* to seek one out in the lifestyle 'marketplace' because tradition no longer sustains the individual by routinely providing a social identity. The same idea is reiterated by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) who describe the expansion of 'individualization' less as a growth in personal freedom more as a matter of individuals having choice forced upon them at every turn. Echoing the Sartrean idea that by virtue of consciousness we are condemned to freedom, Beck and Giddens claim the late-modern subject is condemned to individualisation.

Although he recognises that some negative features attach to the emergence of the hyper-reflexive self, Giddens (1991: 75–79) believes it should generally be seen in a positive light. It does, nonetheless, mean that the reflexive individual's 'self' has to exist in a constant, unrelenting state of self-creation. As reflexive, and as a pervasive feature of its life, the 'self' must continuously attend to its possibilities for self-actualisation as they arise in different situations. It must monitor and reflect on the conditions of its own existence, regularly revising and altering these where necessary. Achieving a coherent identity in these circumstances involves the 'self' in developing a narrative trajectory: a story it tells itself of its personal

growth away from the past into a future where being 'true to oneself' is the desired norm. Giddens (1991: 88–98) exemplifies the working of this 'trajectory of the self' with the emergence of a new ideal-type of contemporary intimacy: the 'pure relationship'. It is a relationship without anchorage in external conditions, either past or present; it brackets-off all traditional assumptions that might impinge on the relationship, so that everything extraneous to it is suspended. It is 'pure' in the sense that it exists solely for its own sake, with its continuity depending entirely on the satisfactions sought and gained by the individuals involved.

The appearance of both the 'trajectory of the self' and the 'pure relationship' involve a shedding of tradition and an identification of the past as an oppressive emotional field from which the individual must escape. It also involves individuals seeking to control 'their' time by rejecting wider temporal orders and replacing them with 'zones of personal time'. These are temporal enclaves removed from the routinised time of the wider world, which enable the individual to focus fully on his or her life-project (Giddens 1991: 77).

Beck identifies something similar. As the ties of tradition shrink back so, he observes, levels of individualisation increase while our sense of the past diminishes:

> …forms of perception become private, and at the same time—conceiving of this along the time axis—they become *historical*. Children no longer even know their parents' life context, much less that of their grandparents. That is to say, the temporal horizons of perception narrow more and more, until finally in the limiting case *history* shrinks *to the (eternal) present*, and everything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life. (Beck 1992: 135, original emphases)

Giddens, (more than Beck) is broadly optimistic about the process of de-traditionalisation and the complementary growth of individualisation, seeing it generally as a 'good thing'. In fact his earlier work on structuration theory (1979: 69–73, 1984a: 1–34) had already set the scene for viewing the past in this fading light. His account of structuration sought to resolve the long-standing issue of whether sociologists should privilege structure or agency in their explanations. This issue is a sociological

version of an older philosophical question as to whether humans have free will or are determined by circumstance. It reflects that enigmatic human experience we have of sometimes feeling thoroughly in control of life, while at others knowing we are in the hands of forces beyond our control. It can be expressed sociologically and rather baldly through two apparently contradictory propositions: that society makes people, or that people make society. While few sociologists adhere to either proposition in a singular way, explanations have tended to privilege one side or the other.

To privilege structure invariably leads to the idea that agents are merely epiphenomenal to structures. Social beings in these kinds of explanation acquire their identity from the social system into which they are born, and act only according to the norms and values of that system. This approach runs in to problems when it tries to explain social change. In diminishing the significance of agency and amplifying the importance of structure it lacks a way of explaining how or why human beings alter their circumstances. It robs the social world of the human dynamic needed for change. On the other hand, from the side of agency the opposite kind of explanation holds sway. In this, agents are privileged and their active powers amplified to the point where the structural conditions of action recede into insignificance. Structures appear to be little more than familiar ways of going on, social habits easily overthrown by the creative actions of agents. Because these kinds of explanations diminish the significance of structures they are unable to account for stability and the persistence of structured patterns of inequality or injustice that familiarly characterise the social world.

Giddens' solution to the problem is to replace the dualism of structure and agency with what he calls a 'duality of structure'. Instead of there being a dualism with two separate entities, that is, structure and agency, he argues for there being a 'duality', where they are conceived as mutually constitutive and existing only as reciprocal entities that produce the ongoing, recursive nature of social life. He puts it like this:

> Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts,

> and produced and reproduced in interaction…The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. (Giddens 1984a: 25)

For Giddens, the reciprocal nature of structure and agency is at the heart of social life and other aspects derivative of it. Because structures are constituted by human agency and at the same time are the medium of that constitution, they are 'virtual', existing only insofar as they are 'instantiated' or made real by actors in their social practices. Actors in their turn must be considered, not as autonomous beings facing society, but as creatures thoroughly *in* society. They must be conceived as both 'capable' and 'knowledgeable' skilled actors able to draw appropriately on the rules and resources (structures) available to them in a way that allows for the reflexive monitoring of the recursive nature of social life (Giddens 1982: 9–10, 1984a: 3). If one could picture Giddens' view of society it would be as a continuous flow of conduct, reproducing and/or altering a social world that *always* has the potential for change.

In making structure and agency opposite sides of the same coin and emphasising their on-going reciprocity, Giddens' aim is to bring a sense of temporal movement to sociological analysis by replacing the more static, reified versions of the concepts that preceded them. Indeed, the very word 'structuration' adds a strong active-verb element to the noun. There are, however, implications attached to this re-conceptualisation. Focusing on the temporal simultaneity of structure and agency and making the 'interactional present' the locus of sociological analysis, means things are shaped in a particular way. In giving primacy to the present, the structured past out of which the present emerged is reduced to being no more than what Giddens calls a 'memory trace' rather than a reality.

When structuration theory claims that structure is only 'virtual' until it is made real by those who 'instantiate' it, it necessarily assumes that the two are always temporally co-present and thus privileges the empirically immediate. Of course in any actual situation structures and agents do 'happen' together in the sense that they are intertwined in that situation, but equally they may be expressions of quite different time tracts and

thus may not be co-present in the way Giddens claims. Bagguley (2003: 147) illustrates the point, noting the temporal non-correspondence between structure and agency with a simple example. He follows Archer's (1995) Critical Realist emphasis on the stratified nature of social reality and thus the fundamentally divergent nature of its different strata such as structure and agency. One key distinction that differentiates them is the time-lag between actors' experience of the structural conditions in which they find themselves, and the prior emergence of those conditions. Bagguley notes that in their struggle for universal suffrage in the UK, the working class and women used the available and emerging organisational resources to challenge their exclusion from the franchise by male property owners. Thus the present structural context of universal suffrage in which politicians seek to woo us all owes little or nothing to current agents and their powers of structuration. It owes much more to a political-structural context enshrined in law and subsequent tradition nearly ninety years ago. This does not mean that agents were not involved in the creation of the structural situation then, but that contemporary agents are acting in a structural situation of which they are not the source. Thus, in order to see how structures and agents affect one another one must establish their analytical distinctiveness. One should not assume that they are one and the same thing because they are intertwined in actual situations.

Because on Giddens' account agency and structure are always co-present with each other the thrust of structuration theory invariably presses towards a 'present' even if it is a past 'present'. As a result the past is always conceived in terms of its agents' experience. The idea that structure might have a history of its own, which imposes itself invisibly behind the backs of current actors, is eliminated. It leads Archer to declare that despite its concern to incorporate a temporal dimension into sociology, structuration theory actually involves the 'suppression of time' (1995: 87).

The effect of this suppression is to wrongly assume that the 'reflexivity' and 'individualization' of today's individuals is entirely attributable to them, as though it sprang directly from their inner capacity to act. Rather, such phenomena may be seen as the outcome of previous interactions that established earlier structural contexts. Beck and Giddens hint at this in the contradiction they unwittingly expose between reflexivity

and individualisation. Where reflexivity usually refers to the inner capacity of humans to choose between things and resist being determined by external forces, their account of individualisation suggests modern hyper-reflexivity has been forced upon them from the outside. The harshness of Giddens' statement that we now 'have no choice but to choose' heightens the implication that there are prior structural conditions already in place which *oblige* the modern individual to be hyper-reflexive. Moreover, this contradiction is ideological in that the individual, while seemingly empowered by the process, can equally well be seen as controlled by it and more starkly vulnerable than ever to market forces.

To be fair, Giddens does have a conception of the *longue durée* of social institutions (1984a: 35–36), one that exceeds the purview of actors, but regards concentrating on their structural properties[13] as valid only in particular circumstances. Only when the sociologist deliberately imposes an *époché* (bracket) on actors' self-understanding suspending their 'reflexively monitored social conduct' does it count as a legitimate sociological move (1984a: 30). In other words, the structured life of social institutions plays a part in sociological analysis *only* if sanctioned by the sociologist as methodologically useful. In effect his and Beck's account of late-modernity and structuration theory confirms the difficulty sociology has in conceptualising the significance of the past in general and tradition in particular.

Are These the Last days of Tradition?

While authors in sociology have not conceived the past in such dramatically repressive terms as Sartre, one of the most powerful assumptions underlying both contemporary and classical sociology, is that with the advent of modernity the decline of tradition becomes irreversible, and its demise more or less desirable. Its end is thought to be inevitable because

[13] It will be apparent that Giddens uses slightly different terms when referring to 'structure' than is familiar in sociology. For him 'structure' refers to the 'rules and resources' actors use in their daily lives; in effect structure is internal to actors (1984a: 25). The usual way structure is referred to in sociology, as something external to actors, Giddens uses in relation to the structural features of institutions.

the dynamic principles of modern capitalist society are inimical to tradition. In different ways, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim all contrasted an emerging modernity with what preceded it. The expansion of capitalist economic relations, the growth of rationalisation and the emergence of organic solidarity dispelled what was often perceived as the mystifications of traditional society. The effect of this dispelling was to subvert any sense of permanence. Marx famously described the havoc wrought by the modernising power of capitalist development like this:

> All fixed-fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away; all new-formed ones are antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (1988: 23)

Despite the claim that the ideas of the classic authors are out of date, much contemporary sociology holds to the same view. For several decades and on various fronts, sociology has recounted the declining influence of tradition as an effect of modernisation. Once powerful cultural landmarks, such as the Church, the Monarchy, and Parliament, no longer command deference from the public. As a traditional social institution, the family is no longer a fixture built around the 'nuclear' format or underpinned by traditional gender roles. The work of Beck and Giddens on the emergence of the post-traditional society and the growth of 'individualisation' has brought this theme to theoretical prominence.

One response to the perceived de-traditionalisation of society, and the most common one in sociology, has been to see it as a process of emancipation from the stifling effects of the past. Another, and the one that underpins the wider themes of this book, is that tradition persists because it is an inevitable (ontological) feature of human life and a key (sociological) element in the social integration of society. Importantly, also, tradition is the ground of the classic text, something I will come to in chapter eight. This is not to say that a number of substantive traditions have not declined and seen their automatic power to command respect diminish, such an undermining may also include the traditions(s) of classic texts. Rather, it is to claim that even though tradition ontologically

conceived cannot be undermined, the substance of many traditions has changed. Taken for granted assumptions concerning tradition are now regularly questioned and challenged. Nonetheless, the effect may often turn out be one of rejuvenation rather than elimination. It may be true that substantive traditions are being questioned more than previously, but such questioning can as readily lead to re-traditionalisation as to de-traditionalisation (Heelas et al. 1996: 2–3; Thompson 1995: 179–206). In a similar vein, I want to argue that the current questioning of classic texts should be seen less as inevitably leading to their downfall, more as providing a space in which their value can be reconsidered.

Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored different ways in which sociology's antipathy to the past has expressed itself. As something that grew out of the Enlightenment, sociology was automatically suspicious of tradition. It equated tradition with habit and habit negatively with mechanical, unreflective social behaviour. This diminution of tradition has carried over into modern sociology where a familiar concept such as 'socialisation' limits itself to matters passed down from only one generation to the next, and then only with those bits of tradition it deems relevant. The wider interconnected patterns of tradition are largely ignored. Modern theoretical outlooks, such as empirical (scientific) sociology, Critical Theory, structural functionalism and interactionism, were also seen to founder on their inability to conceptualise the past in a positive way.[14] In sociology, this avoidance of the past has expressed itself not only as a conceptual problem, but also pointedly as a moral one. For Marx, tradition weighed like a nightmare on the living and even if revolutionaries might need to call up heroes from the past, it would be to inspire the overthrowing of tradition. Acceptance of tradition, for Marx was symptomatic of a condition in which humans were still trapped in a state of nature, the task

[14] It should be noted that while I have sketched out the tendency within mainstream sociology there are other authors such as Eisenstadt, Mann, Skocpol, and Tilly who have sought to link sociology and history.

was thus to bring them out into the light of a rational future. A similar, if more dramatic view was found in the ideas of Sartre. While the tone adopted towards tradition by contemporary sociologists, such as Beck and Giddens was seen to be less dramatic than that adopted by Sartre or Marx, the perception of the past as something from which people would naturally seek to escape remained the same. Indeed, for Beck and Giddens the de-traditionalised condition is upon us. In conclusion and in contrast to this negative view, I have argued that tradition, like habit, should be more positively conceived. If it is seen in ontological terms as an inherent feature of human being then its continuance is inevitable. If it is also seen in sociological terms, as 'social integration' stretched across time, then its importance is considerable. It provides the ground out of which individuals create, recreate, and sustain their identity.

Lockwood (1964) was the first to draw a distinction between 'system integration' and 'social integration'. By the former, he meant the interconnections between the parts of society, such as social institutions, by the latter, the principles through which individuals interact with, and relate to each other. The importance of the distinction lay in the fact that different processes were at work at each level, and one could not assume that consensus or conflict in one corresponded to what was happening in the other. One could not assume that an accord found in the integration of the system would necessarily be reflected in the area of social integration—something the overly 'harmonious' Parsonsian systems theory had tended to do. Likewise, one could not assume that harmony found at the level of social integration corresponded to the same thing at the level of the system—something Dahrendorf's critique of Marxism had assumed. In fact, Lockwood's argument was that conflict and consensus could coexist both between and within these levels. The use of the word 'integration' in either way can thus be misleading, as it is not meant to imply that things are necessarily harmonious. Moreover if, as I want to argue, we take tradition to be the temporal extension of social integration, it would be similarly misleading if we saw tradition as only a dead weight imposing 'harmony' on its subjects. Like social integration, tradition is a living process and can be a site of disharmony, contradiction, and challenge as readily as harmony, unity, and acceptance. Hence, de-traditionalisation and re-traditionalisation are to be seen as on-going moments in the

movement of tradition and the classic text, not as a supra-historical artefact, but something invariably caught up in this process.

In the next chapter the impulse to amplify the importance of the present at the expense of the past is explored more thoroughly. The postmodernist sociological outlooks of Baudrillard and Urry are considered in terms of the way their work privileges the immediacy of the present and occludes the possible significance of the past and thereby of classic texts.

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5

Contested Identity: Sociology in Postmodern Times

Introduction

The previous chapter sketched out some of the ways sociology's origins in the eighteenth century Enlightenment produced in it a desire to break with the past. The legacy of its nineteenth century intellectual founders furthered this antipathy, such that 'pastness' in general carried with it a negative connotation. Successive theoretical and methodological outlooks in sociology have continued this bias in being unable or unwilling to conceptualise tradition as something valuable when considered as an extension of society's social integration across time. It was noted that at times the suspicion of tradition amounted to seeing it as an automatic source of repression. In the hands of Sartre, tradition was even more problematic. For him it was something that could evoke a sense of metaphysical dread, such was the fear the individual might experience in sliding into its clutches and losing all power of self-determination. The work of Beck and Giddens was regarded as more moderate in tone but still shared the assumption that tradition was a restriction on agency, something negative from which the individual would naturally seek to escape.

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In conclusion and in contrast to this, it was suggested that tradition should be more positively conceived. If tradition is seen as social integration stretched across time, then its importance lies in providing the ground from which individuals create, recreate, and sustain their identity. By 'social integration', I am referring to the distinction first drawn by David Lockwood (1964), between system and social integration. By the former, he meant the relationship between the parts of society such as social institutions; by the latter, the principles by which individuals interact with, and relate to each other. The importance of the distinction lay in the fact that different processes were at work in each area, and one should not assume that consensus or conflict in one area corresponded to what was happening in the other, which was something the overly 'harmonious' Parsonsian systems theory tended to do. In fact, Lockwood's argument was that conflict and consensus could coexist both between and within these levels. The use of the word 'integration' in relation to either 'social' or 'system' can be misleading, as it is not meant to imply that things are automatically *harmonious*. Moreover if we take tradition to be the temporal extension of social integration, it would also be mistaken if we saw it simply as a dead weight that imposed 'harmony' on its subjects. Tradition, like social integration, is a living process and can be a site of disharmony, contradiction and challenge as readily as harmony, unity and acceptance; indeed the presence of these latter elements may become the source of new levels of integration. Thus when Beck and Giddens refer to the growing process of de-traditionalisation they have left out of sight the often equal and simultaneous process of re-traditionalisation. Both are on-going moments in the movement of tradition, and because tradition is the ground of the classic, the classic is necessarily caught up in this process rather than being a supra-historical artefact. As a result, as we shall see in subsequent chapters the significance of the insights of a particular classic will change as new contexts of tradition bring them to light.

Where the previous chapter focused on sociology's antipathy to the past, this chapter explores the other side of the coin: the amplification of the present. It does this through an exploration of some of the ideas that fall under the broad label of 'postmodernism'. In the latter

stages of the twentieth century, many in the humanities and social sciences became preoccupied with the idea that key aspects of life were changing in ways that radically altered our understanding of the modern world. It was argued, for example, that a stable conception of 'the real' was gradually being replaced by the sense that reality was ambiguous and indeterminate, and that such characteristics were part of what should be considered the new condition of postmodernity. While the modernity/postmodernity debate took place largely within social theory, sociology and cultural studies, many of the ideas drawn on were developed in the slightly different, predecessor context of poststructuralist thought and literary theory. There are various differences between these outlooks but their affinities are also considerable, not least because of the common origins they have in the philosophy of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard.

One idea that became influential is sometimes referred to as the 'crisis of representation', which derived from the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy. Whether the source was de Saussure or the later Wittgenstein, the relation between the words we use and the things described by them was no longer thought to be straightforward. The assumption that language was the neutral expression of the things it represented fell out of favour, giving way to the idea that language played an active role, not just in shaping, but in constituting the very things it described. The way reality was, came to be seen as no more than the way it was described. Reality, it was claimed, had no existence independent of the linguistic concepts used to describe it. Unsurprisingly, reality appeared to be a much less fixed and more open-ended phenomenon than previously thought, with the implication that re-describing it in a different way *made* it different. Moreover, when this theoretical overmalleability was coupled with the speeding up and fragmentation of contemporary lived experience, it suggested that some of the basic categories of the modern world were dissolving. The 'end of the social' and the 'vanishing of history' were phrases coined by Baudrillard (1983a: 77, 1994: 1) to capture what he saw as the radical indeterminacy of meaning generated by the incessant simulation of the real by the mass media. A corollary of this was that another basic category, the 'human subject', was also thought to be disappearing. No longer could we assume that a unified subject capable of reason, choice,

and decision, lay at the heart of the social world. Of course, sociology in almost all its theoretical forms, structural-functionalist, Marxist, feminist, had long held the view that individuals were not the autonomous creators of their own lives, but were 'de-centred' and socialised into meeting the normative requirements of society. However, on the postmodernist account it was argued that things went further: there was no autonomy for people at all, because, as Rorty (1989: 185) put it, 'socialization goes all the way down'.

It should be noted that these views gained credence in the academic world, not in the world beyond. Outside academia, ordinary people, both individually and collectively, have continued to act as though the 'social', 'history' and their 'selves' have not dissolved. They unselfconsciously assume that the world is real and they have 'selves' capable of choosing and deciding things based on what they know, think and feel. They are fallible and capable of making mistakes, they may act on false information or misunderstand themselves, but they are also capable of thinking, choosing and acting differently. I draw attention to the discrepancy between this commonsensical account of what social agents are like and the account given by postmodernist sociology to highlight how far removed the latter is from the lives of actual people. In that sociology is concerned with those living in society, the comparison makes the adequacy of the postmodernist account problematic. Nevertheless, postmodernist ideas have gained ground in sociology and this has implications for the wider discipline in that they undermine it and in the process render its classic texts null of purpose and void of meaning. Hence, in this chapter, the nature of this postmodern 'dissolving' of the social and of history is explored in terms of the impact it has on the identity of sociology and the resultant way the discipline understands its classics. Some of Baudrillard's ideas are explored and challenged, as are the views of several authors that echo them. Rejected is the postmodernist idea that sociology should dispense with its claim to a coherent identity and accept a more ephemeral identity reflecting the transient nature of present day experience. Although I am critical here of some of the effects postmodernist thought has had on sociology, there have been extensive and valuable discussions of its importance, notably by Parekh (2008) and Susen (2015).

Who Knows Where the Time Goes

Steiner's insight[1] that our current sense of time may be fundamentally changing is one that has gained general currency in the humanities and social sciences, including sociology. The speeding up of communications, of financial transactions and the instantaneous nature of media images, leads to an amplification of the importance of the present and a diminution of our sense of the past. It results in what Christopher Lasch once called our 'waning sense of historical time' (1980: 3ff). It is a situation where the desire to live in the present moment erodes our sense of belonging to a succession of generations stretching from the past into the future. It is, in effect, the spawning of a kind of cultural amnesia. In sociology contemporary notions such as 'time-space separation' (Giddens 1991) and 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1989) seek to capture this idea. At first sight, these concepts seem to refer to different things, but are actually descriptions of the same phenomenon expressed from opposite ends of the process. It is the process whereby a traditional, consistent, closed relationship between time and space is opened up (time-space separation), destabilised and recompressed into an instantaneous present (time-space compression), according to the accelerated demands of a late, or postmodern (capitalist) system. The effects are various, but key here is the way the continuity of tradition loses its significance for social life. Certainly, Beck and Giddens acknowledge the declining significance of tradition though they also recognise that traditional practices persist to some degree. Beyond this however, postmodernist authors believe we are now in a situation where tradition has ceased to play a part. Where modernist authors have viewed tradition as an obstacle to be overcome, postmodernists see that battle as already won. The moorings of tradition have been slipped and for postmodernists there is now clear water between it and us.

The most radical account of this is found in Baudrillard's, *The Illusion of the End* (1994). In this, he draws attention to the speeding up of time and 'the vanishing of history', though for him, unlike Steiner, it could

[1] See the epigram at the head of Chapter 1.

be a source of delight rather than regret. It opens up the possibility of an ultimate liberation.

> …one might suppose that the acceleration of modernity, technology, events and media, of all exchanges—economic, political, sexual—has propelled us to 'escape velocity', with the result that we have flown free from the referential sphere of the real and of history. We are 'liberated' in every sense of the term, so liberated we have taken leave of a certain space-time, passed beyond a certain horizon in which the real is possible because gravitation is still strong enough for things to be reflected and thus in some way to endure and have some consequence. (1994: 1)

For Baudrillard, one explanation for the loss of connection to the past is the speeding up of time to the point where we have spiralled out of the era where we could assume a temporal reality was something 'out there'. Instead, we now find ourselves in a situation where both 'time' and the 'real' lack all substance, seemingly have no claim on us, and in effect have become illusions. He posits more than one reason to explain how we came to lose our connection to the past, suggesting, paradoxically, that it is just as likely that time has slowed down as speeded up. However, this turns out to be less a reversal of the first claim than a complement to it. Time is slowing down and history vanishing, he argues, because things have speeded up so much they have produced a surfeit of media 'events', a blur of images to which people have become indifferent. The silent majorities or the masses appear as an inert force unmoved by the rapidity of events in turn nullifying the effects of history.

> This inert matter of the social is not produced by a lack of exchanges, information or communication, but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges. It is the product of the hyperdensity of cities, commodities, messages and circuits. It is the cold star of the social and, around that mass, history is also cooling. Events follow one upon another cancelling each other out in a state of indifference. The masses, neutralized, mithridatized by information, in turn neutralize history. (1994: 3)

Nevertheless, whether time is speeding up or slowing down, according to Baudrillard, history is disappearing. The sheer number of 'events'

reported by the mass media, the reduction or amplification of the importance of these events, and the blurring of connections between them, makes distinguishing temporal causes from effects impossible.

It is difficult to know what credence to give these claims, as Baudrillard does not offer any evidence to support them, nor any criterion by which the truth of them could be sought. One might expect that as the claim revolves around the experience of time some analysis of evidence gleaned from actual people as to their perception of time might be relevant. However, this is ruled out by his judgement that people are an inert mass rendered immune to the effects of events by an excess of information, which neutralises any historical meaning. He has decided ahead of time what people experience and it is that 'history has stopped' and everything is now in the present (Baudrillard 1984: 24–25).

The End of the Social and the Referent-less Text

As time fades and history vanishes, so also any sense that the social world has an enduring, substantive quality dwindles. In his earlier *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983: 76ff) Baudrillard explored the implications of this for sociology in terms of what he declared to be 'the end of the social'. He offered three alternative views of what is happening. First, he suggested that 'the social' never really existed because there have always been simulations of what is real, and thus 'the real' has never been really real. Second, that the real has always existed everywhere, but therefore lacks all specificity, and is certainly not something warranting the particular attention of a social science. Third, and this is the view with which he seems to agree as he dwells on it most, that it has truly existed, but does not exist anymore. Roughly speaking the argument is the same as that brought with regard to history. The proliferation and mass circulation of signs, made possible by the new digitised media, have destabilised the meaning of reality so much that it has effectively ceased to exist. The incessant simulation of reality through the mass media draws the life out of 'the real'. Moreover, as 'the social' is an effect of 'the real', and the latter has died, then the implication for sociology is considerable (1983:

91–94). It means that because 'the social', like 'the real' has become illusory, sociology no longer has an object on which to focus.

Lying behind much postmodernist thought is Saussure's theory of structural linguistics. Central to this is the distinction he makes between *'langue'* and '*parole'. Langue* is the system of rules that underpin language use, while *parole* refers to actual instances of language use. He insisted on the primacy of *langue* over *parole* because he believed that what people said or heard only made sense in terms of a pre-existent system of rules. In accordance with this, it is argued that meaning is generated from *within* the structural system of (linguistic) signs, not from their connection to an external reality. In fact according to Saussure the opposite is true: what appears as external reality is in fact generated from within the system of signs. A sign is made up of two elements: a signifier, which is an uttered or written word, and what is signified by it, which is the concept or idea of it. The fact that what is signified by the word or utterance is the concept or idea, *not* the 'thing' in the wider world beyond the sign, means that the language system never reaches wider reality. Thus severed from it, language as a system of signs is seen to possess an inordinate degree of power in defining the meaning reality takes. The overweening power thus attributed to language in this model is what enables Baudrillard to claim the 'end of the social' or the 'end of history' has happened, as though writing or saying it makes it so.

A negative implication of incorporating Saussure's structural linguistic model into sociology is that it eclipses the significance of *parole,* which is the arena in which actual events of human communication take place. It is also the arena in which people live their lives and thus should be a key focus for sociology. It would seem perverse for sociology to declare it irrelevant. An adjacent problem, amplified by Baudrillard, is the way it closes down the referential function of language. One of the primary purposes of language is to enable people to say something about something to other people. For language to work at all as communication it must inherently have the sense of referring to something other than itself; it must give us some purchase on the real beyond language, even if our access to it is through language. On the structural linguistic model, however, language generates meaning only internally through the differences between signs within the language system. Though entirely misleading,

once this assumption is in place it produces the incongruity of the referent-less text.[2] However absurd, it confirms Baudrillard's claim that there is no 'object', no referent to the text of the 'social' or of 'history' because the real is not really real but only exists as something constructed behind the closed doors of linguistic signs.

Sociology's classic texts are similarly rendered pointless because they also are deemed referent-less. They may come from an era when the real, according to Baudrillard, was possibly really real, but they have become superfluous because that era no longer exists. Interestingly, and as if a sign of the times, four years after Baudrillard wrote of the death of the social, something very similar was expressed in quite a different context when the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, declared 'there is no such thing as society'.[3] It also had a peculiarly dispiriting ring for sociologists, especially in Britain.

It is not always easy to follow the claims made by Baudrillard. He shifts back and forth between different discursive modalities often confusing epistemological and ontological claims. He confuses, that is, questions about the adequacy of knowledge of things with the being of things, that is, with what is. He lets the kind of claim made in one area misleadingly slide over into another. It is one thing, for example, to claim that the proliferation of media messages has destabilised meaning to such an extent that it makes knowledge of reality indeterminate (epistemology); it is quite another to use this to declare 'the end of the social' or that the social 'has never really existed' (ontology). The same applies to his account of history. It is one thing to say that our understanding of historical events has become indistinct because the surfeit of information we have about them has blurred our grasp of history (epistemology), quite another to

[2] Whether Saussure should be blamed for the overextension of his theory to encapsulate postmodernist ideas is doubtful. The theory was written to counter nineteenth century assumptions that language had to be understood historically, hence his concern with synchronic structures as the source of meaning. See Baert (1998: 15–16).

[3] The phrase came to prominence in Britain in 1987, when she declared that it was not the government's job to alleviate social problems such as homelessness because there was 'no such thing as society' that had created the problems. Rather, she said, it was the responsibility of individuals to solve their own problems, because only individuals and families existed. Unsurprisingly she had a notably unsympathetic view of sociology. The interview was printed in *Woman's Own* magazine, 31 October 1987.

say that as a result history has vanished or ceased to exist at all (ontology). In effect, Baudrillard collapses ontology into epistemology, suggesting that things can have no existence independent of the way we know them (Baudrillard 1983: 79–94). It means that because knowledge of things is always mediated, and current mass-mediation has undermined the clarity with which we know things, we are entitled to claim they no longer exist.

Interestingly the limitations of this anti-realist view came into sharp relief two days before the Gulf War of 1991, when the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain published an English translation of Baudrillard's essay, 'The Gulf War will not take place'.[4] Whatever was going to happen in the Gulf, he declared, it was not going to be a 'hot war' or a 'cold war' and therefore could not be a real war; real wars could only now happen if the media simulated them as real. Ironically, two days later reality snapped back and war broke out with extraordinary ferocity, reminding sociologists of the ineliminable nature of reality, something aptly captured in Archer's (1995: 1) phrase 'the vexatious fact of society'.

On Baudrillard's account, where once the classical sociology of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim assumed that the reality of 'the social' or 'society' was substantive, now the endless simulation of the social in mass media images exposes it as a multifaceted chimera. This view is shared by others, such as Game (1991: 5) and Denzin (1992: 23) who argue that 'society' is a conceptual abstraction, a fiction created by sociologists in their texts. Because of this the concepts used by the founders of sociology, such as ideology, class conflict, and social solidarity, no longer refer to anything real and the only useful role for the classic text is to become an object of deconstruction. For postmodernist authors, the task becomes one only of deconstructing how the classic authors brought off the idea of the socially real in their texts. The implication is that if sociology continues to treat its classical canon as a potential source of insight, it will lead the discipline down a blind alley. The logic of this argument is that because we have entered a new era, preserving anachronistic sociological works will actually reinforce Steiner's dismal prognosis that classics are now no

[4] Baudrillard published two more essays on the Gulf War: 'The Gulf War: is it really taking place?', and 'The Gulf War did not take place'. All three are translated and collected in *The Gulf War did not take place* (2006). For an acerbic critique of Baudrillard on this topic see Chapter 1 of Norris (1992).

more than museum pieces. They might be of interest to an archaeology of knowledge or a history of ideas, but they will do nothing to enlighten the work of the contemporary sociologist. However, it is mistaken to claim that postmodernity heralds a fundamental rupture in reality and that traditional categories have thereby become empty vessels. Certainly, it is easy to perceive that life has speeded up and that this has wrought many changes, but as with all social-historical change, more carries over from the past and continues into the present and future than first meets the eye.

Several authors have located postmodernism as characteristic of the cultural sphere rather than a society-wide phenomenon (Habermas 1996; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991). What postmodernists have done, these authors believe, is to overstretch their accounts of the hedonistic aesthetic principles prevalent in the postmodern cultural sphere and made them, as it were, into the whole story. In presenting them as a total account of contemporary society, they have underestimated the continuing significance of other spheres, notably the sphere of capitalist economic relations. This sphere, with its volatile cycles of growth and recession and its orientation to purposive-rational action, exerts its own pressures on life-practice independent of the blandishments of postmodern culture. One might note in passing, for example, that in recent times it is a crisis in the international banking system and a subsequent major economic recession that has had the most dramatic impact on people's lives, not postmodern culture.

Echoing postmodernist claims that traditional categories have ceased to be relevant, the process of globalisation is often taken to indicate the growing irrelevance of the nation-state (Bauman 2002; Delanty 1997; Urry 2000; Walby 2003). International economic and cultural flows mean that for some sociologists the traditional nation-state should no longer be considered an explanatory category. Because the discipline's classic authors assumed that 'society' was the same thing as the nation-state, it is argued that their work is now out of date. Such judgements though, like Baudrillard's declaration of the 'end of the social', are similarly misleading. It is interesting to note, for example, that the nation-state is the entity that recently intervened with its taxpayer's money to shore up the failing banking system. It is also the political leaders of

nation-states that have sought the best route to ameliorate the effects of recession on their citizens.

Postmodernist Claims and the Identity of Sociology

Not everyone shares the view that the categories used by classical sociology are out of date and thus inapplicable to contemporary situations. In defence of classical sociology, Bryan Turner (2006) argues that it does not need to redefine itself because its focus was already on the broader, global category of 'the social', not on (national) 'society'. Notwithstanding Baudrillard's dismissal of 'the social', Turner argues that while it is difficult to define exactly what 'the social' is, it does underpin the regular, collective life-practices of all human beings. Distinct from the 'egoistic individualism' other social sciences assume to be at the heart of the human world, sociology sees 'the social' as that underlying sense of collective trust as the common bond that is presupposed in all social interaction. This interaction creates symbolically meaningful patterns, which cohere in the form of the social institutions regularly analysed by sociologists, such as the family, citizenship, religion, and the law (Turner 2006: 134–135). In addressing this sphere in different ways and at different levels, Turner believes the concepts of the classical tradition are well able to deal with contemporary supra-national ideas such as cosmopolitanism. Certainly, one can argue that all texts have a level of semantic autonomy that allows them to be understood beyond the confines of their original meaning context. Because the canon of classical sociology was shaped by an earlier historical context it does not mean that its texts necessarily lack contemporary significance.

Sociology, nonetheless, has always been predisposed to privilege the present over the past. The idea that the discipline is in crisis because its old theories are out of touch with new sensibilities has a long history.[5] Though different in many other ways and separated by more than twenty-five

[5] The search for a unified discipline amongst the diversity of views espoused by its practitioners has been a feature of sociology since its inception. See Camic and Joas (2004: Chap. 1).

years, the message of Gouldner's, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1971) is in part the same as that found in David Parker's, '*Why Bother with Durkheim? Teaching Sociology in the 1990s*' (1997). For both it is not only the fact that old theories are in some respects inaccurate, but more seriously for a sociology committed to the present, they lack resonance with current perceptions, and thus may seem irrelevant to students.

The discrepancy between the old and the new has produced a steady rumble of debate over the years, often concerned with the identity of sociology and its future as an academic discipline. In the USA in the 1980s, Randall Collins (1986) and Norman Denzin (1987) shared a brusque exchange of views. Collins maintained that sociology was 'in the doldrums', in part because it had fallen prey to a fashionable anti-positivism that involved a (postmodernist) refusal to accept the social world had any objective existence. The lack of any commonly understood sense that the social world had an objective status, against which the adequacy of sociological accounts could be assessed, has led to the idea that one account is no better or worse than another. Denzin replied to the charge of 'relativism' by declaring that the discipline's weakness, if weakness it was, lay in the Collins version of sociology, which naively clung to the old positivist hope for a 'unified science'. As reality was multiple, he declared, sociology had no business being singular. Most sharply critical of the current fragmented state of the discipline in the USA though, has been Irving Louis Horowitz (1994). He describes the situation not in terms of regret for a lost unity, but angrily, at the thoroughgoing 'decomposition of sociology'. The breakdown of the core of the discipline, he avers, has allowed it to become primarily a vehicle for the partisan concerns of disaffected interest groups. The concerns of these groups to further their interests have reduced sociology from being a discipline concerned with the *study of* ideology, to *being an* ideology itself (1994: 16).

The same tension between old theories and new postmodernist sensibilities is apparent in Britain. John Scott (2005a, b) has sought to affirm the disciplinary integrity of sociology against increasing levels of fragmentation, caused by both intellectual and institutional change. Like Turner, he draws attention to 'the social' as the common bond which sociology's classic authors discerned and were able to reveal in their own unique ways.

> What is important here is simply the claim that there needs to be a foundational science that is able to grasp the central characteristics of the social in all its dimensions and in all its particular applications. This *general* conception of sociology was—in one form or another—central to the sociological vision, of most, if not all, of the sociologists of the formative period of the nineteenth century and they made it the cornerstone of 'classical sociology'. (Scott 2005a: Section 2.1)

For Scott, this shared cognitive bond needs to be affirmed in the face of new specialised sub-disciplines that either derive from, or are adjacent to, sociology. Amongst others, he has in mind the emergence of education studies, criminology, health studies, media studies, business studies, and particularly cultural studies. Unsurprisingly, in becoming autonomous these sub-disciplines have little interest in or loyalty to sociology. In effect, they involve a thinning down of the sociological enterprise both in terms of the way the knowledge they produce refracts back onto sociological knowledge, and the effects they have on the migration of scholars out of sociology into other disciplines. As Scott ruefully remarks, 'sociology might well be described 'in Hollywood B-movie terms as the "incredible shrinking discipline", settled on the descent into nothingness' (2005a: 3.7).

Cultural studies, is of particular note because the knowledge it produces and the assumptions on which that knowledge is based, have fed back into sociology, reshaping the latter around what is now called the 'cultural turn'. While intellectual engagement with the cultural dimensions of social life has opened sociology to a range of enriching influences, literary, cultural, and philosophical, it has also made sociology less distinctive as a discipline. As Scott observes, one only has to go into any high street bookshop to see 'sociological material under "Cultural Studies", just next to the sections on "Mind, Body and Spirit"'. Privileging the cultural sphere, as postmodernists do, has diminished the visibility of other social spheres in the sociological imagination, and with it core aspects of the discipline. It has produced what Rojek and Turner (2000) critically refer to as 'decorative sociology'. Basic assumptions about the reality of the empirical world have been replaced by the idea that social reality is analogous to a text. The effect of this analogy, when taken too literally, is

to alter the agenda of the discipline quite radically. Because increasingly 'social and economic issues are interpreted as issues of cultural layering', sociology is wont to see its task in terms of literary-textualist analyses of these phenomena (2000: 639). One sees this, for example, in the way matters of social and economic inequality, which used to be central to the discipline, have been subtly transformed into the more neutral matter of cultural difference. For Scott, the openness of sociology to new phenomena and to new ways of looking at them depends upon its ability to maintain the core ideas central to its identity. Important for this is the 'taken-for granted, but rarely explicated' concept of the 'social', which the classic authors first distinguished.

Responding to Scott, Urry (2005)[6] sees the issue quite differently. Times have changed, he argues, and sociology cannot and should not hold on to its traditional assumptions. There is 'no simple centre to sociology' and trying, as he thinks Scott does, to erect boundaries around something that cannot be bounded is futile. The vast array of intellectual developments over the last two or three decades—'Marxism, discourse analysis, post-modernism, post-structuralism, rational choice theory, cultural/linguistic turns, psychoanalysis, globalisation debates, turn to the body and performativity, complexity'—have transformed sociology into a multifaceted discipline (2005: 1.4). If it lacks a core identity, he claims, this is all to the good, as there is correspondingly no singular entity called 'society' to which sociology could refer. If this makes it difficult to identify exactly what makes a sociologist or a sociology department, it is in Urry's view a symptom of success not failure. Employing the Foucauldian idea of knowledge as an archipelago, he sees the diffuseness of sociology as a virtue in that it exists beneath the surface of different areas, resurfacing as an island in unexpected places. Traditional sociology has to be abandoned, he maintains, because new forms of the 'social' emerge and the variety and complexity of these means that they have to be analysed by drawing on

[6] Nicholas Gane (2004), and Beer and Gane (Eds.) (2004), opened this debate over the nature and future of sociology. The issue was taken up by Scott (2005a), with responses from Urry (2005) and Daventian (2005). Scott (2005b) replied to these responses.

> 'insights, formulations and theories produced in diverse sites: by those developing and employing existing and emergent technologies, by various social and political movements, and by those partially extruded from reductionist disciplines where the social is just too troublesome. But unlike those other disciplines our comparative advantage lies in providing a field or site in which formulations of the social that get extruded from such 'reductionist' disciplines find a contingent home within a broad church so enabling sociology's 'hundred flowers' to bloom (to mix many metaphors). (Urry 2005: 1.9)

Urry concludes, quite oddly I think, that sociology's increasing diffuseness and its resultant disappearance as a distinct discipline is actually a symptom of its expansion.

Like other authors who embrace postmodernist ideas, Urry rejects notions of (disciplinary) boundaries and determinate identities; nevertheless, one should note certain contradictions in his account. It still assumes the existence of the 'social' as the focus for sociological work, even if it is something that exists in myriad forms. Similarly, for sociology to resurface in different places like an archipelago, it must already exist in some substantive way below the surface (Scott 2005b: 6.3). For Urry, the speeding up of life and the rapid growth in its diversity is reflected in the variety of sub-disciplinary developments he advocates. On his account, sociology is right to part company with the work of its classic authors because they are from the past, and as the past is no longer with us, they can only appear as 'past it'.

From another angle though, and one I shall develop in the course of this book, a different outlook emerges. Against those who would seek to deny the past, and who strain after ever-new concepts to capture the novelty of the present, I want to talk of the way the past infuses the present. This is not to say the past and the present are not separate, but rather that they exist always in relation to one another. Conceptualising the relation between the two needs to encompass both a sense of continuity and discontinuity, something expressed in the rather uncanny idea of things remaining the same in becoming different. It is an idea more succinctly expressed in the phrase: 'sameness-in-difference'. Moreover, privileging the novelty of the present over

the past in the way postmodernist thinkers do, could be seen as an ideological move in that it renders sociology more an expression of the transient appearances of present society than a discipline seeking to explain those appearances.

The 'Dissolving' Subject and the Reader-less Text

The tendency to focus on the present at the expense of the past, and to accept the prevailing culture of commodity production and consumption, is also reflected in the postmodernist attitude towards the subject. In the same way that postmodernists have sought to dissolve sociology's identity to bring it in line with the mooted dissolution of 'society', so also they have sought to dissolve any unities associated with the subject, unities that might otherwise resist the process. The social agent on this view is often seen as no more than a contingent amalgam of disparate externalities, a kind of hollow, 'subjectless subject' blown hither and thither by the siren calls of the market. In line with this, and bringing his views on the dissolution of the social into conjunction with it, Baudrillard describes the (collective[7]) human subject, as an inert mass.

> The whole chaotic constellation of the social revolves around that spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucent reality, that nothingness: the masses…Now in fact the masses have no history to write, neither past nor future; they have no virtual energies to release, nor any desire to fulfil. (1983: 35, 36)

I do not want to suggest that the human subject should be thought of as a simple unity, but problematic is the postructuralist and postmodernist idea that it lacks *any* unity, or that any unity it seems to have is no more than an endogenously imposed effect of language or of the mass

[7] Baudrillard was originally a Marxist, so thinks of agency in collective class terms, rather than in terms of individuals.

media.[8] Such a view produces an abstract notion of identity in which individuals lack depth, continuity or any active internal dynamic. It necessarily means that human subjects have been eliminated as conscious, embodied readers capable of understanding and evaluating what a classic text has to say about a real world beyond that text.

In practice, of course, sociologists are invariably confronted, to misquote Archer (1995: 1) a little, with what might be called the vexatious fact of the subject. In doing empirical work sociologists are regularly faced with the fact of actual individuals who refuse abstract, endogenously imposed definitions. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of the on-going nature of the social world without a conception of individuals possessing some powers of agency. Moreover, to have such powers, to be able to *act*, to be able to *read,* an individual must have a continuous though not rigidly fixed conception of self, one that can place that 'self' in relation to what has been read and relate that to the wider world. The idea that I want to affirm is that while an individual's continuous sense of self is ontologically inviolable, it does not imply that it is a fixed atemporal entity. It is rather to suggest the idea of a 'self' is something that develops across time and which mediates the tension between the polarities of stasis and change, sameness and difference. It is an idea that has been developed in different ways by Archer (2000: 1–50), McNay (2000: 74–116), Ricoeur (1991, 1992).

Summary and Conclusion

Postmodernist ideas, exemplified by Baudrillard's work, suggest that we have entered a radically new era in which a surfeit of signs generated by the media has thoroughly destabilised reality. Where the modernist outlook that preceded it viewed tradition as an obstacle to be overcome, even if its end was in sight, the postmodernist sensibility is indifferent to tradition. For postmodernists, tradition has ceased to have any real bearing on

[8] By 'endogenous' here, I mean to include the idea that the unconscious is endogenous too, in that it regularly disrupts the unity of consciousness as if from the outside.

contemporary life; its only value is to be trawled for new, playful ways of reworking old ideas. Indeed, some even argue that this may herald a new era of 're-enchantment', countering the process of disenchantment familiarly known as the outcome of the 'rationalisation' of the modern world as described by (Weber Ritzer 1999). An effect of this weakened sense of the real is to undermine the idea that 'society' or 'the social' and its traditions have any stable, independent existence, and thus renders obsolete any insights the classical authors might have into the contemporary world.

Nevertheless, while the postmodernist account may reflect changes in the cultural sphere, it underestimates the independent reality of other spheres, notably the economic, and the impact it has on people's lives. The question of the validity of the postmodernist case reappears in debates over the identity of sociology in both Britain and the USA. Authors sympathetic to the postmodernist case, such as Baudrillard, Urry, and Denzin have sought to jettison the ties sociology has to its classical authors on the grounds that their concepts are at odds with the fragmentary life experienced by those living now. However, others, such as Archer, Scott, and Turner, argue that the basic concepts developed by classic authors have a wider and more profound application than postmodernists believe. In addition, to suggest that sociology should change its identity to mirror the shifting appearance of society was seen to offer the prospect of turning a critical discipline into an ideology.

The validity of the postmodernist case also brought into question its theoretical dissolution of the human subject and the idea of the reader-less text. Not only was postmodernism seen to have rendered the classic text author-less and referent-less, its dissolution of the subject also sealed the fate of the reader. The idea of the reader-less text, however, was confronted on the grounds that reading presupposes a subject with a continuous sense of 'self' capable of understanding and evaluating what is written in a text about a world that exists beyond that text. Challenging the assumptions of the postmodernist outlook hopefully allows the importance of the past, tradition, and the value of the classic text to reappear. This is because the ground for the ability of the classic to speak beyond its original context lies in the myriad, often subterranean ways the past continues into the present. It is something explored in more depth in the next chapter.

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6

Rethinking Tradition

Introduction

In the previous chapters attention was drawn to sociology's often myopic vision of the past, with the implication that the view it had of its classics was similarly limited. It was noted that the rapidity of social change in recent decades had also amplified the tendency to diminish our sense of the past. Authors, such as Baudrillard, Beck, Giddens, and Urry have seen the speeding up of time, the expansion of information exchange, and the increasing velocity of goods across continents, as signalling a new order. They see it as an order that has been lifted out beyond the influence of the past and is now centred on a perpetual present where these changes herald a new era of freedom, one only possible in a reflexive, post-traditional world. In short, they identify contemporary society as an essentially traditionless one. For Beck and Giddens the virtue of this late-modern world is that as tradition has diminished so the 'self' has been released, allowing it to come into its own and fulfil its full reflexive potential.

There is a different view: Connerton (2009), for example, is also aware that the temporal acceleration of lived experience has produced amnesia towards the past, but he is much less sanguine about its effects than Beck

A.R. How, *Restoring the Classic in Sociology*,
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or Giddens. For him, it has the unhappy outcome of eroding social trust with the result that individuals are trapped in what he calls an 'intensified immediacy' (2009: 87) where they are unable to locate themselves as part of a stable narrative. This waning sense of past and future, he argues, leaves people immersed in a 'hyper-present', stranded without access to anything beyond.[1] Without tradition, he believes, people live lives based on ephemeral experiences because they and their experiences have no location in a meaningful context. Although the view being developed here is closer to that of Connerton than Beck or Giddens, both views mistakenly assume that tradition has been extinguished as a significant force and that a state of traditionlessness has effectively become a fact. However, while tradition is now frequently challenged and lacks much of the automatic acceptance it once had, insofar as socialisation and social integration are pre-requisites for any on-going sociality, then as a body of tacit knowledge and practice through which people orientate themselves, it necessarily continues.

This chapter covers a wide range of material through which I want to challenge ideas which reify the present at the expense of the past and consider the latter's relevance by reflecting on the importance of tradition and habit. Moreover, re-shaping these ideas in a more positive way will provide an important preamble to the discussion of the classic text because tradition and habit provide the ground from which the classicity of a classic becomes apparent. In this, and in subsequent chapters, I am arguing for an alternative view of the classic to the one usually assumed. The standard view is of a text that is timeless in having risen above the effects of history and tradition. Instead, I will argue that a classic shows us how connected we are to our historical tradition.

On the Persistence of Tradition

One of the most insidious legacies of the Enlightenment is its prejudice against tradition and the setting up of modernity as its antithesis. Modernity rejects the authority of the past in favour of using objective

[1] Connerton's view in *How Modernity Forgets* (2009) is markedly gloomier than his earlier *How Societies Remember* (1989), though the substantive focus is also slightly different.

reason unfettered by what it sees as the prejudices of tradition. This inevitably leads to the idea that the growth of modernity must involve the destruction of tradition. Once this view hardens into a binary opposition tradition inevitably appears as something irrational, a desultory refuge for those unable to face the future without the ready-made prompts and cues of the past. Such a condescending view though assumes that tradition is no more than a dead relic from a bygone era imposed on us from the past. It is more accurate to say that tradition is not something passively received from the past, but something interpreted as part of an active life process. Moreover, one could quite easily argue that the hyper-reflexivity described by Beck and Giddens as the opposite of tradition, is in fact an amplification of the tradition of individualism that derives from Enlightenment thought, and one of a cluster of traditions that make up the modern world.

Work in the social sciences and in history writing has often carried this negative view of tradition into its own investigations, seeking to expose the social artifice that holds a tradition together. Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) argued that many actual traditions thought to be 'natural' and centuries old were in fact recent inventions. The Scottish highlands tradition, rituals of the British monarchy, and traditional tribal chiefs in Africa exemplified the socially constructed nature of tradition. In sociology, Billig's *Banal Nationalism* (1995) drew attention to the way mundane aspects of life invisibly help to reproduce national identity, and although the latter is not exactly the same as tradition it does show how tradition is supported by ordinary things such as symbols on money, and nationalistic assumptions made in television newscasts. While neither of these works dismisses tradition as simply false, both view it as something not quite rational, a fabricated, ideological phenomenon in need of debunking. In contrast, I want to argue that tradition shows itself not as something irrational, but as a subtle on-going process where particular forms of reason are vital components of social continuity.

At various points I shall sketch out a brief etymology of certain words. If we look at the origins of such words as 'tradition', we can often find embedded in them unexpected meaning possibilities. Words carry within them other worldviews capable of supplementing and expanding our

own, uncovering threads of meaning that lie dormant. Contemporary language use has the force of familiarity behind it and this immediacy can work like an ideology convincing us that this is *the* world and there is no other because it so regularly gets talked about in this way. The importance of searching behind the familiar is not to recover an original meaning for its own sake, but to break out of the accumulated speech assumptions of the present time.[2] When the sedimented deposits of recent usage are uncovered new ways of thinking and feeling may become apparent. If we look at the origin of the meaning of the word, tradition, other ways of understanding it present themselves. The Latin word for tradition is *trāditiō*, which derives from the root verb *trādere*. In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* volume 2 (2002: 3317) tradition is defined not as something imposed on the present by the past, but as matter handed down, offered, delivered up, or otherwise passed on from one generation to the next either orally or through custom. The *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1983: 1369) also describes it as a process of handing over doctrines, customs, tales, beliefs, and practices, in fact 'anything bound up with or continuing in the life of a family, community, etc.' What is revealing about *trādere* is that it is not just about transmission, but about conserving something valuable and passing it on to the next generation for safe-keeping. This latter sense was made explicit by Roman Jurisprudence and was concerned with the laws of property inheritance, though it was also implicit in the wider meaning of tradition. The implication was that tradition carried within it something of value that was being passed on and which took the form of a gift, and like any gift evoked in the receiver a sense of gratitude and obligation (see Gross 1992: 9). In effect, what Roman Law did was to make explicit one of the most primordial features of human life: the need for the receiver of a gift to reciprocate in some way, in this case by cherishing those things that have been handed down as tradition. In his famous anthropological work dat-

[2] An interesting example of how the accumulation of assumptions can affect the meaning of words is given by Gadamer (1996: 117–120). Talking to his secretary he found that she had mistaken the word 'authoritative' for 'authoritarian', and assumed he had meant the latter because she had never heard of the former. The contemporary habit of seeing authority automatically in a negative light had gone so far that the idea of something or someone being 'authoritative', that is, expert and knowledgeable had been lost. Indeed, he notes that 'authoritarian' only took on its really ominous present day meaning with the rise of Hitler.

ing from 1922, *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1990) argued that while gifts appear to be freely given they carry the obligation of reciprocity. The receiver of the gift feels obliged to reciprocate because the gift is not just an object, but is in a sense a part of the giver, and this immanent connection between giver and gift has to be acknowledged. If it is not, if the receiver refuses the gift or otherwise fails to acknowledge the inner connection between giver and gift, he or she will be morally and psychologically diminished because the bond of reciprocity upon which social life depends is being broken.

It has to be said that Mauss was mainly concerned with the way the exchange of gifts functions to ensure social solidarity in archaic societies, though he did believe that the same principles were at work, albeit less noticeably, in modern societies. Nevertheless, those who reject the significance of tradition could still argue that because life in modern societies is based on the mass production and consumption of commodities, the relationship people have to gifts or any other kind of object is different from that in pre-modern societies. In modern societies, *things*, so to speak, are not what they used to be, because the process of commodification has hollowed out the immanent connection people once had to certain goods, including gifts and the 'thought goods' passed down as tradition. As a result the modern relationship is likely to be more superficial, even cynical, as objects appear increasingly ephemeral. The speed with which goods are now produced, consumed, disposed of, and replaced by something new could suggest that the Maussian 'gift relationship', like tradition, has little relevance today. Yet as it stands this view is only half the story, and on its own, is misleading. Marx, and subsequently Frankfurt School authors have certainly described this hollowing out process in vociferously negative terms. Commodity fetishism, Adorno (1991) argued, has come to shape contemporary life in a thoroughgoing way. Fetishising commodities involves mistakenly attributing larger-than-life qualities to things that have in fact been contrived solely for the purpose of monetary exchange in the market. While at first sight this seems to confirm the sceptical view that the 'gift relationship' and tradition are now empty, inauthentic vessels that have been colonised and commodified by the culture industry, there is another way of looking at it. Commodity fetishism itself can be thought of as a distorted ver-

sion of the exchange relation that Mauss was talking about. The attachment people have to such goods, the desire to enjoy their qualities, to feel affirmed in owning them, even if these feelings are the result of commodity fetishism, nevertheless reflects a genuine wish to find significance in things beyond their use-value. Indeed, Adorno, despite his aversion to the blandishments of the culture industry, believed they spoke to the real needs people had for certain kinds of emotional connection. In the same way I want to argue that however much traditional ideas are currently open to challenge, tradition in some form will continue as it is essential to the continuity of social integration.

Indeed, does it make sense, as Giddens and Beck suggest that a reflexive subject free from the constraints of tradition is now emerging? Can the identity of an individual ever be fashioned primarily through his or her own conscious reflexive powers? Surely the formation of an individual's identity requires them to draw, wittingly or not, on the symbolic and material conditions passed down through tradition?

The Continuity of Tradition: De-traditionalisation as Re-traditionalisation

If we characterise tradition as the on-going acceptance of established ideas, the idea that late-modern society is unique in seeking to de-traditionalise itself is problematic. We only have to widen the historical lens a little beyond the immediate past to see the French Revolution (1789) and the Russian Revolution (1917) as attempts to expunge the entire tradition of those two countries and start anew. There may be some truth in the Beck and Giddens' claim that late-modern society is de-traditionalising itself, but we need to establish more clearly what this de-traditionalisation means. Certainly, some aspects of life have been exposed to levels of critical scrutiny unfamiliar in earlier times. In Britain the traditional authority of prime ministers and politicians is frequently challenged, even mocked, and the assumption that 'they know best' regularly called into question. Beck (1992: 195ff) refers to the emergence of a 'sub-politics' or politics from below, where 'new social movements' and other groups bypass traditional political routes to realise their interests.

The deference once accorded to the monarchy has also largely gone by the wayside, with newspapers happy to focus on the intimate detail of the private lives of the royal family and for television to satirise them. This view though assumes that the basic condition is one of an on-going de-traditionalisation, whereas it may often be the case that the process of challenging tradition contains within it a further development, that of re-traditionalisation. Both Luke (1996) and Adam (1996) make the point that the contrast between modernity and tradition has been exaggerated and accepted too readily as though it were a simple truth, when in fact traditions are always open to human agency and what we are seeing now may be one of the rejuvenation of tradition rather than de-traditionalisation as countenanced by Beck and Giddens.

In *The Media and Modernity* (1995: 179ff) John B. Thompson addresses the issue of re-traditionalisation, though he does not use the term, but speaks of the 'uprooting and re-mooring of tradition' (1995: 193). He points out that prior to the advent of the mass media people largely got their understanding of the past and a sense of their place in the wider scheme of things directly through the symbolic content of face-to-face interaction. With the coming of the modern media, however, things changed. Subsequently, through media representations people gained access to wider horizons and different traditions, something that opened up a space through which their own traditions might be seen in a different light and be reflexively challenged. Thompson, however, does not see this as leading to the enervation of tradition or its gradual extinction, but to the opposite: the enrichment and expansion of tradition in new contexts. Like Hobsbawm and Ranger he notes that many traditions which we imagine to be of ancient origin are actually relatively recent inventions. Unlike them, though, he is less concerned to highlight their fabricated nature than to show their capacity for self-renewal. It is often assumed, for example, that the rituals and customs of the British monarchy are ancient and unchanging, when in fact they have altered over time with many contemporary practices invented in the late nineteenth century. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century royal ceremonies were largely performed for other royal and aristocratic families and the social elite that surrounded them. Such ceremonies were often incompetently conducted and reported in a hostile way by the press (Thompson 1995: 199–

200). In the latter stages of the century, beginning with Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, things changed. Where royal ceremonies had been inept affairs, over time they were gradually transformed into carefully planned spectacles of great splendour, something that evoked an altogether more admiring press response. Moreover, the spread of literacy meant that larger numbers of people could now read newspaper reports and feel part of the royal celebrations.

From this point on the royal tradition transformed itself by inverting the relationship that previously existed between the monarch's political power and her or his popularity. In the face of the push in Britain in the early twentieth century towards greater democracy, workers' rights, and better welfare provision, the political power of monarchy declined. But at the same time the grandeur of Queen Victoria as the head of state of a vast, burgeoning Empire, coupled with the greater access people had to the rituals of royalty through newspapers (later radio and television), enabled the monarchy to be seen as an institution above and beyond politics and as a popular symbol of national unity. Of course this re-traditionalisation has produced its own internal tensions. The monarchy's popularity today depends on the support of the media, whose concern is often with mundane, sometimes salacious matters, something that works against the monarchy's need to retain an air of detached mystique. Thompson (1995: 201) puts it like this:

> On the one hand, the appeal of the monarchy, and of the royal rituals associated with it, stems from its capacity to stand above the mundane world of party politics and to present itself as a body whose integrity and probity is beyond reproach, a body clothed in ancient costumes and governed by time-honoured customs which, when re-enacted before us all in the carefully managed ceremonies appearing on our television screens, endow the monarchy and its temporal representatives with an other-worldly glow. On the other hand in an increasingly mediated world, it is difficult for the temporal representatives of the monarchy to avoid appearing as ordinary individuals, as men and women who are little different from other individuals apart from the accident of birth, and are prone to the same temptations, driven by the same desires and subject to the same weaknesses as ordinary mortals.

The example of monarchy is not meant to suggest that traditions invariably continue *ad infinitum*, clearly some do not. Rather, it is to say that traditions are not static objects, but dynamic processes capable of developing in response to challenge. Indeed, I want to argue that the healthiest traditions are conservative, not in the usual sense of preserving something in aspic, but in the sense that they conserve 'difficulty' rather than brushing it aside. A healthy living tradition embodies what Davey (2006: 50–54) refers to as 'continuities of conflict'. This means that it is not the passively accepted verities of a tradition but the arguments over the tradition's 'goods' which give it its particular point and purpose. Hence, the current tension within the tradition of monarchy between its need to be popular and its need to retain the mystique of being removed from the lives of ordinary citizens, may be just the 'conflict' or 'difficulty' which sustains it. The tension may not be resolvable, but the manner in which the two opposing poles interlock and are held in 'dialogue', means that such difficulty is not an inhibitor but an on-going driver of tradition.

On Traditionality

The focus above suggests that tradition is primarily a cognitive affair about substantive issues, but the idea that a tradition could re-traditionalise itself suggests something more. It suggests that behind these explicit matters there are important invisible traditionary forces at work. Given the generally negative reception it gets in the humanities and social sciences, it might seem odd to suggest that there is a latent need for tradition, but if tradition is conceived as social integration stretched over time, and we acknowledge the importance of the latter, then the idea becomes less strange. Durkheim introduced the concept of social integration into sociology and it appears explicitly or implicitly in virtually all his work. He located it as a necessary feature for the viability of all social life, linking it to 'ritual' and 'social effervescence', such that these elements were seen as dynamically heightening on-going feelings of integration and reintegration.

While the existence of an inherent need for tradition cannot be proven, it can be pointed out that historically, across thousands of years all kinds of societies seem to have developed traditions (Gross 1992: 64–65). Moreover, arguments brought by authors such as Gehlen (1988) and Gadamer (1988) suggest their inevitability as well as their importance. Writing from the angle of philosophical anthropology Gehlen (1988: 119–120) sees tradition as something generated by the history of the human condition. Human beings, he argues, are peculiarly vulnerable because unlike other animals they have not developed specialised biological capacities to deal with the hazards of any particular environment, capacities that other animals have used to ensure their survival. Humans are not naturally 'at home' in any particular environment as other animals are, but constantly have to be alert to ensure their continued existence as every environment presents 'surprises' to which humans are not adapted. In fact:

> In terms of morphology, man (*sic*) is, in contrast to all other mammals, primarily characterized by deficiencies, which, in an exact biological sense, qualify as lack of adaptation, lack of specialization, primitive states, and failure to develop, and which are therefore essentially negative features. Humans have no natural protection against inclement weather; we have no natural organs for defense and attack, but yet neither are our bodies designed for flight. (Gehlen 1988: 26)

In other ways too humans are easily assailable. Compared with many other animals, their natural faculties of smell and hearing are inferior; their offspring are unable to look after themselves for many years after birth, during which time they remain in need of adult care and protection. In fact what Gehlen finds remarkable is that *Homo sapiens* did not die out long ago in pre-historic times. His response to this mystery is to argue that while human beings appear to be particularly susceptible to danger because they have not adapted to nature, this ironically turns out to be the source of their success, not their failure. In coming to dominate an importunate natural environment, with nothing but inventiveness to protect them against danger, humans have developed innovative ways of transforming the world to suit their own interests. In fact he argues that *Homo sapiens* are naturally 'un-determined' by

virtue of their 'world-openness'[3] (1988: 27), meaning that they have no essential nature, but are receptive to, and act creatively on the host of novel stimuli facing them in all their various environments.

At the same time and in order to manage the burden of a chronically unpredictable environment, humans have found relief from the excess of stimulation generated by danger in creating cultural traditions. These traditions mediate between them and nature. It might sound rather glib to suddenly insert 'culture' to account for human survival in the face of its biological lack, but Gehlen has a broad anthropological cum sociological notion of culture in mind:

> "Culture is hence an anthropological concept and man is a cultural being… Culture is firstly the totality of physical and intellectual means and techniques including institutions by which a specific society "maintains itself;" secondly, it is the totality of all resulting institutions based on it. (1988: 72)

By institutions he means not only familiar sociological ones such as the family and the state, but more widely all kinds of routinised human behaviour. Institutions, he argues, provide the cement that holds the identity of a human group or society together; they establish and regularise the quasi-automatic habits of thought, feeling and judgement which stabilise patterns of behaviour and make life more predictable. Like authors in interpretive sociology, he recognises the importance of 'language' and (human) 'self-consciousness' to the process of institutional regularisation, and how this underpins the accumulation of knowledge, skills, and the normative expectations of tradition. All this provides an opportunity for humans to learn things independently of biological stimuli. Indeed, because human beings are not always bound by the pressure of the immediate environment, they can consider matters from a wider perspective, and in applying the collective wisdom of their tradition anticipate outcomes and plan effective courses of action to various different situations.

[3] The term 'world-openness' is drawn from another key figure in philosophical anthropology, Max Scheler in his book, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*. The term implies a certain distance exists between humans and their world, which enables them to take up an 'objective' attitude towards it. This contrasts with others such as Heidegger, who emphasise 'being-in-the-world' rather than distance from it, but whose work is nevertheless related to philosophical anthropology.

Gehlen's ideas have been challenged from the left for the conservative way they affirm social institutions *per se* (Apel 1972, Vol. 1: 204ff; Habermas 1983: 111ff). In this, it is argued that his undifferentiated view of them as an automatic 'good thing' tells us nothing about the validity of the norms underpinning them, something that leaves us unable to distinguish between repressive and progressive elements in social life. It is a weakness that seems to be confirmed by aspects of Gehlen's personal life.[4] Nevertheless, both Apel and Habermas' early work, though critical of Gehlen's shares with it a philosophical-anthropology outlook based on the idea that there are deep-seated 'interests' underpinning different aspects of the human world and structuring the knowledge we can have of it.[5] Moreover, my aim here is not to address the wider issues of institutional validity, but to draw from Gehlen's work the idea that tradition is not a superficial add-on to human life but fundamental to it.

The tenor of Gadamer's work is different from Gehlen's as is the literature on which he draws; Gehlen's sources are from biology and zoology where Gadamer draws on philosophical and occasionally theological texts. Nevertheless, their ideas run in parallel over the question of 'human being', 'environment', and 'tradition'. Although the idea of an 'environment' in the sense of a social milieu or context is a central explanatory concept in sociology, in another sense human beings do not have an environment, or at least not one that resembles the environment of animals, something that has always made explanation by (social) environment alone problematic for sociology. For Gadamer animals are immersed in their environment and inhabit it opportunistically to meet biological imperatives such as the need for food, shelter, reproduction, self defence. Their daily lives are structured as a succession of problems and opportu-

[4] The issue of his conservatism revolves around his association with the Nazis. He joined them in 1933, though by the 1940s he was drawing away from them and according to one source his work effectively destroyed any notion of the validity of racism or biologism—see Karl Stiegbert Rehberg's introduction to Gehlen (1988).

[5] Most famously in social theory is Habermas' 'Knowledge and Interests' (1966) and *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971) where he described three anthropologically deep-seated human 'interests' in (1) the control of the material world, for which science is the key knowledge, (2) the expansion of horizons of meaning for which the hermeneutic disciplines produce the relevant knowledge, (3) human emancipation, for which Freudian psychoanalysis and his own Critical Theory provide the templates.

nities[6] deriving from these imperatives. Animals do not weigh reasons for doing something nor morally justify to themselves a particular action—they just do it. By contrast, insofar as humans have a language that has conceptual powers reaching beyond the immediate environment, they are not wholly immersed in satisfying biological necessities. It is more accurate to say that humans have a 'world' rather than an environment (Gadamer 1989: 443–445; see also McDowell 1996: 115–119). To have a 'world' by virtue of language, Gadamer argues, means we 'have an orientation toward it', and to have an orientation means we humans have an outlook or an attitude towards the world, implying that we have *some* freedom from it in the sense that we do not mechanically respond to it as a succession of problems and opportunities driven by biological imperatives. Gadamer (1989: 443, 444) puts it like this:

> To have a world means to have an orientation (Verhalten) toward it. To have an orientation, however, means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is… Moreover, unlike other living creatures, man's relationship to the world is characterized by *freedom from environment*. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together. To rise above the pressure of what impinges on us from the world means to have language and to have "world". (original emphasis)

At first sight there is an odd juxtaposition of ideas in this statement as Gadamer is saying on the one hand we have an orientation towards things, something that would predispose us to think in certain ways and implying our freedom is limited by that orientation. At the same time he is claiming that this 'orientation' is a source of freedom from things we encounter. What he means is that in having an orientation towards the 'world' through language, humans gain some detachment from their immediate environment which enables them to see things as they are. When he describes this relation as 'freedom from environment' there is

[6] Of course this does not mean that animals *conceive* of their lives in terms of problems and opportunities as that would be to suggest that they are full-blown subjects that reflect upon their lives in conceptual ways—rather it means that we (humans) conceive their (animal) lives in terms of being structured in this way by virtue of biological imperatives (McDowell 1996: 116).

an emancipatory note in it, suggesting that human beings, unlike animals, freely reflect on their situation. This appears to make it similar to the hyper-reflexive freedom Beck and Giddens attribute to the modern subject, however, this is not the case. Gadamer is not referring to a disinterested observer capable of reflecting on everything, but to a fully fledged human subject enmeshed in the world—hence his phrase, 'to have a world means to have an orientation toward it' (1989: 443). To have an orientation towards the world, rather than just responding to what is encountered in it, means to have a wider view, a way of looking at things based on the inherited presuppositions of tradition. In fact he uses the term 'prejudice' rather than 'presupposition' as a more provocative term with which to challenge the positivist ideal of objective knowledge as something pure, and presuppositionless (1989: 270–271). He uses 'prejudice' in the (German) legal sense of being a first provisional judgement not a final one. His aim is to draw the term away from its current meaning as something automatically false and reveal the more fundamental Latin meaning of being a precedent. This precedent could prove to be false *or* true, but whatever the case its truth or falsity will *derive from what preceded it*, that is, the prejudice that came before it, and thus it will not be a presuppositionless truth. For Gadamer the presuppositions of tradition are ontological features of being human and so can never be wholly dispelled or otherwise eliminated. In fact they are not biases that restrict understanding, but what enables it to happen in the first place. They are not fixed ultimate judgements, but the first opening we have onto an understanding of anything. Together, they constitute what he, following Heidegger, calls tradition's 'fore-structure of understanding' (1989: 265ff), which is the prior set of assumptions we inevitably bring to an understanding of things. It is what enables us to have a 'world' from which we have some autonomy rather than being immersed in an environment. Thus for Gadamer, tradition comes before, during, and after the fact; it is what we are rather than what we have. I will return to the role tradition plays in his thought later, as it bears on the nature of the classic text.

The view that tradition is not only a necessary feature of human life, but is also something more subtle and pervasive than a stock of background choices, is the one I want to hold to, but it has not always won

the day. Bevir (2000), for example, in an extensive article identifies tradition alongside other similar concepts such as paradigms, structures and episteme, as primarily a device to explain how individuals choose one course of action over another. He prefers the concept of tradition because it is less deterministic than the others, allowing for a greater degree of agency

> The concept of tradition, in contrast [to paradigms etc.], suggests that a social inheritance comes to each individual, who through their agency, then can modify and transform this inheritance even as they pass it on to yet others. (Bevir 2000: 10)

While his view has the virtue of not reducing agency, it suggests too readily that tradition is a largely conscious affair dependent on individual agents changing things and passing them on to the next generation in a deliberative way. In this, it not only mistakenly assumes agency is the prerogative of individuals rather than a collective activity, but also that tradition is something easily available to, and manipulable by those individuals. Moreover, it sets out a version of things where agency is set in opposition to tradition. Thus for individuals to act in an agentic way they have to escape their starting point in tradition. Sharpening up the distinction between the two, Bevir (2000: 12) puts it like this:

> Although tradition is unavoidable, it is so as a starting point, not as something that determines, nor even limits later performance. […] In particular, we should not imply that that tradition is in some way constitutive of the beliefs that people later come to hold and the actions they then perform. Although individuals must set out from within a tradition, they later can extend, modify or even reject it in a way that might make it anything but constitutive of their later needs and actions… The content of tradition will appear in their later performances only insofar as their agency has not led them to change it.

There is little sense in this account of the truth of Gadamer's insight that whether we find the presuppositions of tradition to be true or false, we do so based on what preceded them. Moreover, whether we accept, modify, or reject tradition, that acceptance, modification, or rejection

will express a relation to what went before. Hence the contents of tradition *will* be constitutive of later performances whether or not those performances involve changing or rejecting the contents of tradition because even these outlooks represent a connection to tradition, albeit one writ negatively.

In effect what Bevir does is to continue the Enlightenment assumption that agency and tradition are opposed to each other. Like Beck and Giddens he sees in agency the refusal of tradition and in tradition a nulling of agency. Against this I want to argue that agency and tradition presuppose one another, such that you cannot have agency without tradition nor tradition without agency. Tradition is more than a backdrop or starting point from which agency must escape to come into its own, it is rather something that *generates* agency.

Conceived like this, substantive traditions are not background ideas so much as concrete realities embracing the tacit understandings that make up everyday life. Although they are not unavailable to critical inspection, they are never fully available, and for the most part are accepted without being subjected to rational analysis. Certainly, long before we reflect on our possible life-choices, we are formed in the context of the lives of our parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and teachers. The cultural milieu of our family, neighbourhood, education, and nation-state, provide the bedrock out of which emerge our subsequent decisions. Importantly, each of these arenas has in its turn a history and tradition that has generated its own ways of going on. Our speech patterns, styles of comportment, the way we address others, the fears, hopes, and aspirations we have are not a simple reiteration of things past, but are, nevertheless, variations on what has preceded us across generations. Whether we are aware of it or not, the past not only lives with us, but *within* us, it is pre-reflectively embodied in our selves as we inhabit our various traditions. If we minimise the fullness of the significance of traditions as one critic of Bevir has noted, we 'reduce ourselves to contentless, choice making monads with no purpose' (Frohnen 2001: 109). Indeed, it is likely that those who deny the continuing significance of the past in the present and who most relish its seeming demise, may unwittingly be the most susceptible to its effects.

Having dwelt on the importance of tradition and the fact that it is generally held in low esteem because it is wrongly conceived as something

that restricts human freedom and initiative, I now want to turn to the nature of habit as one of the main constituents of tradition and draw out the same implication: that habit is not a matter of mindless repetition, but is something of wider, positive value.

Habit as Tradition

In Chap. 4 I discussed the fact that even Max Weber, who developed complex sociological typologies, could only find in traditional forms of action, unthinking, habitual responses, which for him meant they were barely meaningful at all. He did acknowledge that much social action seemed inevitably to take this form, but did not change his negative view about it. It was noted that other early sociologists such as Charles Cooley, W.I. Thomas, and Robert Park recognised the relevance of habit to the social world, but that for various historical and intellectual reasons the concept has, with a few exceptions, fallen out of use. What follows in this section addresses the negative view of habit seeking to replace it with a more nuanced and positive view.

The meaning of 'habit' with which we are familiar is that of a regular pattern of thought or action acquired through frequent repetition. It implies a lack of conscious awareness and is very much the antithesis of the reflexivity claimed for the modern subject. It is the absence of any sense of conscious reflection being involved in habit that is the source of its negative image. Where animal behaviour is governed by a limited repertoire of automatic responses to stimuli, human beings are supposed to be capable of reflecting on situations and making rational choices. Thought based on habit suggests it is the opposite of real thought, a devitalised, mechanical process that has abdicated responsibility for what happens. Hence, on this kind of assumption the closer human beings are to 'habit' the further away they are from being properly human. The wider moral and political implication is that those who are habituated to certain courses of thought and action will have a passive, uncritical outlook that too willingly accepts the injustices and repressions of the *status quo*. Such a notion of 'habit' offends the vital importance we attribute to the free-thinking autonomy of the modern subject.

However, as with 'tradition', if we look more closely at the etymology of 'habit' we uncover a wider range of meaning than the one that has taken hold in modern times. C*hambers Twentieth Century Dictionary of Etymology* (1988: 459) points to its Latin origin in *habēre*, meaning to have, to hold, or to possess, suggesting something that is actively acquired rather than something that has, holds, or possesses us. We still retain the notion that to be in possession of, or to have 'good habits' is akin to having skills which enable us to do things well. 'Habit' also refers to the outward appearance of things, to a robe or garment used in religious ceremonies, to an individual's general demeanour or the way they comport themselves. So, for example, to comport oneself 'bravely', 'timidly', 'arrogantly', or 'thoughtfully' is to suggest that an individual has developed a stable, on-going tendency towards a particular kind of action without it being predictive of any particular action. Moreover, this notion of habit as a persistent disposition by which an individual is recognised has a social subtlety well beyond any notion of mere repetition.

In terms of philosophy the idea that 'habit' is the enemy of genuine thought has its origins in Descartes and Kant, both of whom regarded it as something that negatively impinges on the possibility of (pure) reason. They defined reason as something that had to be free from superstition, historical context, tradition, bodily impulse, passion, habit, and so forth. In short, anything other than reason itself that played a part in the process of reasoning, diminished reason. This way of conceiving things inevitably produces a mind/body dichotomy, where reason is supposed to take place in a disembodied mind unsullied by outside forces. It also assumes reason is a primarily reflective activity rather than an embodied one preceded by a raft of practical habits, both mental and physical, and undertaken by people who are concretely involved in the world.

There is though, another philosophical tradition deriving from Aristotle and continuing into modern times via Hegel and Ravaisson and including more contemporary phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau–Ponty and Ricoeur, which seeks to redeem 'habit' from its lowly position by finding in it active virtue rather than dead, mechanistic response. Crossley (2001: 3) makes clear the nature and implication of this alternative view:

> We (should) learn to see our reflective consciousness and self-consciousness as the tip of an iceberg, founded upon a pre-reflective foundation of perceptual, linguistic and motor behaviours. Moreover we are forced to think of these behaviours, though purposive, without presupposing a reflective being at the back of them, willing or designing them in any way (content of brackets added).

Ravaisson's *De l'habitude* first appeared in French in 1838, recently appearing for the first time in English as *Of Habit* (2008). It describes two versions of 'habit', the first as a general and permanent way of being' (2008: 25), by which he means something enduring rather than everlasting.[7] The second refers to something actively acquired as the consequence of a change. This latter 'special' notion of habit involves repetition, but the focus is on habit as the method by which change is met or accommodated by a new habit. It is the interconnection between habit and change and the fact that habit develops in response to change, but *also* that change emerges from habit, which inspires him to uncover something about habit that is fundamental and positive.

His account of habit is ontological and refers not only to the being of humans, but to the being of the organic world generally including the vegetal world. The exception, the one area that does not exhibit habit is the inorganic world, where he notes (following Aristotle) that no matter how frequently you throw a stone in the air it will never acquire the habit of flying (2008: 25; 119, note1). Even if we exclude the inorganic world the extent and significance of habit to the organic world is nevertheless considerable. The inclusive nature of the organic world also marks off his ideas from another nineteenth century tradition of thought, the *geisteswissenschaften*, where a sharp, sometimes ontological distinction is made between the human and the natural worlds.

What makes Ravaisson's account important is that it does not ignore the familiar Cartesian/Kantian idea of seeing habit as repetition, but locates it along with the activeness of habit as part of what he calls 'the double law of habit' (2008: 37). Habit is usually seen as an obstacle to clear

[7] The early parts of Ravaisson's text are quite difficult. I found the commentary by Carlisle and Sinclair particularly useful in clarifying matters, such as habit as 'permanent' meaning 'enduring, stable and continuous' but not 'everlasting' (2008: 79).

thought, it reduces spontaneity, it is the rut we get stuck in. Ravaisson does not deny this but brings out its enigmatic quality by showing that it is also something enabling, indeed a capacity that lies at the heart of human freedom (see Carlisle 2014).

The double law of habit is underpinned by the idea that repeated action (sameness) can only be what it is against a backdrop of change (difference), as difference (change) only makes sense against a backcloth of something that endures (sameness). What makes his account striking is that he does not set these principles up as opposites but as part of the same thing: habit. He describes it like this:

> The continuity or repetition of passion weakens it; the continuity or repetition of action exalts and strengthens it. Prolonged or repeated sensation diminishes gradually and eventually fades away. Prolonged or repeated movement becomes gradually easier, quicker and more assured. Perception, which is linked to movement, similarly becomes clearer, swifter and more certain. (Ravaisson 2008: 49)

Habit then is not a process of mere nullification, but is as much a kind of freedom that emerges in the body as it adapts to change and is something that 'subsists beyond the change that brought it about'. Moreover this change is not just another state or neutral condition; it is a 'disposition' or orientation towards further activity. The athlete that grinds his or her way through hours of painful training habituates his or her body to pain, gradually finding that through constant repetition the discomfort subsides and movements become smoother. A gliding sensation of feet barely touching the ground replaces the doggedness of the initial effort. The activity of running is thus transformed by habit into an effortless, athletic second-nature embodied in the runner. The same might also be said of someone learning to play the piano. The first efforts at mastering the keyboard produce nothing but frustration, but the repeated, mechanical practice of scales, chords, and other musical exercises gradually lead the novice to a level of competence that opens up all kinds of musical possibilities. The pianist's keyboard familiarity, fingering technique, understanding of composition, of melodic concepts, and harmony all emerge through habitual practice, enabling

the player to play increasingly varied and more sophisticated pieces and perhaps to consider composing. The result is what Ravaisson would call the 'contraction' of a musical disposition. Thus habit not only persists beyond the change that brought it about, it contains within it the possibility of further change. It is this idea of habit as fostering an incipient skill that can also be applied to the reading of classic texts. The repeated reading of such a text enhances the reader's skill in appreciating what the text has to offer allowing subtler and more sophisticated levels of meaning to emerge.

Following the path taken by Ravaisson, Merleau–Ponty's description discards the negative, mechanistic version of habit, finding it instead to be an expression of embodied intelligence. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) he rejects the mind-body dualism that characterises modern thought by showing how we are always united with our bodies such that engagement with the world invariably happens not through the objective workings of a disinterested mind, but through a pre-reflective, always-embodied self. If I get up out of this chair and go to leave the room I do not to ask myself if my legs are still there to walk on, remind myself how to walk, or calculate how far the door must be open to let me through; I know these things, so to speak, without knowing them. I move through the world unaware that my body's intelligence goes ahead of me.

Acquiring a habit for Merleau–Ponty is not a blind, unthinking reaction, but a 'reworking and renewal of the bodily schema' (2012: 143), which produces its own kind of habituated body-knowledge. The woman who wears a feather in her hat knows 'without any explicit calculation' where the feather is and how to keep it safe from objects that might damage it. Similarly, if I seek to drive a car down a particularly narrow road, I do not have to get out of the car and measure its width and then the available space in the road (Merleau–Ponty 2012: 144). The car and the road are not objective objects which I examine, but elements in the pre-reflective perceptual system through which a human life is led.

In formulating things this way Merleau–Ponty sought to cut a path between two opposing views of habit: 'empiricism' (or behaviourism) and 'intellectualism' (or rationalism). Without trying to re-state all the elements of his critique, we can roughly summarise by saying that the

weakness of the former view is that it reduces the complexity of habit to a stimulus-response model of behaviour which ignores the meaning-complexity of the phenomenon for an agent. Even where the meaning of a phenomenon for an agent is recognised, the empiricist view still suffers, he believes, from an atomistic outlook where the density of the hermeneutic context in which the agent is embedded is downplayed. From the other side, while the intellectualist tradition has frequently levelled the criticism of 'meaning-paucity' at empiricism, it does at the same time fall into its own trap of overstating the cognitive powers of the agent as the assumed source of meaning. Empiricism assumes the reality of the object as unproblematic, intellectualism assumes the reality of the subject as unproblematic. However, given that Merleau–Ponty rejects the notion of habit as either a mere physical response, or as a reflective mental achievement, it is difficult to be exact about what habit does represent for him, indeed he asks the question: 'if habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an automatic reflex, then what is it?' (2012: 145). Although he seems to deny that habit is a form of knowledge his answer to the question does veer more towards 'knowledge' rather than to it being a reflex. Because our usual understanding of knowledge is that it is the outcome of conscious reflection, alternative versions of knowledge are not easily expressed. What is clear is that Merleau–Ponty has in mind the idea that knowledge, properly understood, is essentially a situated, practical activity rather than the outcome of disinterested mental activity. His emphasis is on the idea that habit is a kind of (incarnate) knowledge rather than a reflex, not least because he calls it a 'knowledge of familiarity' but also because it is purposive, requires effort, and more widely is the ground on which more formal, reflective knowledge stands.

These examples might suggest that habit is an individualised phenomenon of only secondary importance to the sociologist, but it is as much an intersubjective, social phenomenon as a private matter. In the *Structure of Behaviour* (1967: 168) Merleau–Ponty describes the way pre-reflective habits conceived in this positive way underpin the complexities at work in a football match. Again he notes that for a player, what is going on around him is not the objective movement of objects of which he is one, but a force field in which he is immersed and where the things

around him, including the ball, are, to use Heidegger's famous phrase, 'ready-to-hand'.[8]

> For the player in action the football field is not an "object"… It is pervaded with lines of force (the "yard lines"; those which demarcate the "penalty area") and articulated in sectors (for example, the openings between the adversaries") which call for a certain mode of action and which initiate and guide the action as if the player were unaware of it. The field itself is not given to him, but present as the immanent term of his practical intentions; the player becomes one with it and feels the direction of the "goal," for example, just as immediately as the vertical and horizontal planes of his own body.

For Merleau–Ponty, while the player is not *un*conscious, equally he insists 'it would not be sufficient to say that consciousness inhabits this milieu' (1967: 169). Rather, we can say the player's consciousness is wholly absorbed in the to-and-fro of the game. It is the player's pre-reflective habits that enable him without thinking to see 'openings' between opponents through which to pass the ball, and to know whether the player receiving the ball prefers an 'underweighted' pass that arrives at his feet, or something that moves more quickly past him and onto which he can run. Such judgements will also entail consideration of the wider force-field made up of other players vying to find space or block space, of where the play is in relation to goals, and of how long there is left to play. The know-how required to deliver the right kind of pass is not gained in a reflective manner through prior discussion in the dressing room, but absorbed pre-reflectively in the process of playing the game as part of a team. Habit conceived like this is both a practical and a creative activity, one far removed from the idea of a blind response.

[8] The term 'ready-to-hand' comes from Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1978) where he makes a distinction between it and 'present-at-hand'. The former refers to things which show themselves as immediately available in terms of the practical nature of our lives; they are part of our pre-reflective understanding of the world. The latter refers to things which are regarded in a disinterested, theoretical light; they are part of our reflective understanding of the world. Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty does not dismiss the importance of reflective knowledge but places it in a secondary position to, and dependent on, the pre-reflective realm.

A clear-cut example of contemporary significance of this pre-reflective body-knowledge is that of learning to use a computer keyboard (see Crossley 2001: 122). To start with one has to look to find the keys and the process is a halting one, resembling a chicken pecking for food. Gradually as one becomes more competent, the fingers slide more easily across the board and scarcely require any visual confirmation; the fingers 'know' where the keys are. What makes the example doubly striking though is that if one had to say which keys were where; one would be hard pressed to give an accurate answer. Of course one's fingers 'know', but one's reflective consciousness does not.

Having linked tradition and habit and emphasised their importance for an understanding both of the social world and the human subject, I now want to draw the concepts of know-how and disposition into the picture. The aim is to show how this nest of concepts throws light on the way humans inhabit their social world and what they find meaningful in it. Such concepts suggest that there is a raft of pre-reflective knowledge cutting across the very possibility of consciousness being disinterested enough to be objective. The implication is that we are not, and cannot be, neutral in the judgements we make, including the judgements we make about what we regard as a classic. Because so much of our conscious life is shaped by pre-conscious assumptions, the idea that a classic is a text where supra-historical qualities can automatically be recognised by an objective reader is necessarily ruled out. Yet it is the idea that consciousness is *compromised* by its pre-reflective structure that I want to challenge. I want to reverse this idea and argue instead that the very conditions that seem to rule out the validity of such judgements are actually the source of their possibility, and that valuing a text as classic actually depends on letting them come into play.

Habit, Know-How and Disposition as Propaedeutic to Understanding the Classic Text

An earlier, similar example to the one I cited from Crossley can be found in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (2000: 40) where he points out that someone learning to play chess may learn its rules by heart, but once he

(*sic*) has learned to play the game and does so regularly may forget them and be unable to cite them correctly even when he knows when a rule has been broken. To add insult to injury to those 'intellectualists' who insist on the centrality of reflective thought, he points out that one might even learn how to play chess without being told the rules or reading them, but learn instead by habitually watching the moves players made and how these involved taking or conceding pieces. Like Merleau–Ponty, Ryle wants to reverse the traditional Cartesian assumption that reflective knowledge is the acme of reason, and other pre-reflective elements inferior. Both see a vast swathe of pre-reflective knowledge that both literally and metaphorically precedes and exceeds reflective achievement; they believe that this should lead us to de-throne the assumed omnipotence of reflective consciousness, and acknowledge that in many ways we know more (pre-reflectively) than we know (reflectively).

The distinction between reflective and pre-reflective knowledge is expressed by Ryle as a distinction between 'knowing-how' and 'knowing-that'. 'Know-how' is a *practical* form of knowledge involving knowing how to do something, such as riding a bike or speaking a language. It may be a simple or a complex skill, but it obeys different criteria to 'knowing-that'. 'Know-that' is knowledge based on propositions and is expressed in terms of facts and theories which can be judged true or false, such as 'Berlin is the capital of Germany', or 50x10=500.

What Ryle wants to do is to reverse the traditional assumption that knowledge proper is only of the 'knowing that' kind and that 'know-how' is inferior to, and dependent on it. Intellectualists (his term) who insist on the priority of 'knowing that' argue that only actions which are preceded by some conscious reflective thought based on propositions can be considered rational or intelligent. One claim he brings against the intellectualists is that their argument is itself not rational because although it claims to be rooted in the Cartesian finality of reflective thought, it is in fact based on the slippery ground of 'infinite regression'. Because for intellectualists an act is rational only when it is preceded by conscious reflective thought, it means that the reflective thought, which is also an act, must be preceded by another reflective thought to make it rational, and that thought must have its preceding one too, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Since it came to the forefront of attention in philosophy in the 1950s, and centred as it is on the reconstruction of traditional epistemological assumptions about knowledge, Ryle's distinction has intermittently been a bone of contention. Three broad views have emerged about the distinction: (1) 'knowing-how' and 'knowing-that' *are* distinct (Carr 1979, 1981); (2) 'knowing-that' is really a species of 'knowing-how' (Hartland–Swann 1956, 1957); (3) 'knowing-how' is really a species of 'knowing that' (Stanley and Williamson 2001; Stanley 2011). My concern, however, is not whether the distinction is watertight but with its value in helping us recognise the importance of habit, and how it, along with tradition, bears on the role of our understanding of classic texts in a social context.

Many, if not all of Ryle's ideas coincide with those of Ravaisson and Merleau–Ponty. It was noted earlier that Ravaisson referred to the double law of habit which involved both 'diminution' and 'expansion'. As part of the process of the formation of habit, 'disposition' emerges. By disposition he means that out of habit there develops an active sense of being disposed to be, or do something.

> Continuity or repetition must therefore gradually weaken feeling, just as it weakens sensation… At the same time repetition or continuity makes moral activity easier and more assured. It develops within the soul[9] not only the disposition, but also the inclination and tendency to act; just as in the organs it develops the inclination for movement. (Ravaisson 2008: 69)

What is notable here is the reminder that insofar as habit is an ontological feature of the organic world its virtues are not restricted to the 'intelligence' of physical movement but includes the development of a moral habit or disposition with a concomitant inclination towards moral action. Certainly Ryle shares the view that (pre-reflective) know-how, disposition and action are bound up together.

In fact Ryle links know-how and disposition to 'understanding' more generally. His concept of understanding bears more than a passing resem-

[9] Although Ravaisson makes no explicit theological statements, his work is written against the background of a Christian worldview.

blance to the one familiar to sociologists through Weber's work, namely the concept of *Verstehen*. It is usually translated as 'sympathetic understanding' but has a more nuanced meaning and extensive implication than that suggests. In sociology *Verstehen* is of importance because the sociologist cannot gain access to the symbolically pre-structured meaning of the social world through *observation* alone, as the natural scientist can do with the physical world. Furthermore, this understanding of meaning cannot be controlled by method in the same way that observation can be controlled in the process of scientific experiment. The ability of the sociologist to understand social meaning depends on the fact that s/he already in a certain way *belongs* to it, and is in effect a virtual if not necessarily an actual participant (see Habermas 1984: 108). Ryle holds a similar view, for him understanding entails engaging with something rather than observing it. To say we understand something, he argues, is to mean that we can do it, or do something related to it such as talk meaningfully about it to someone who is similarly familiar with it. In his discussion of understanding he reiterates the importance of the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that. For example, we can say we understand chess only when have the know-how to play the game or talk about it meaningfully to someone who is a competent player. A person who cannot play chess could observe the moves being made but would not see the wisdom or the folly of those moves (see Ryle 2000: 51). It is only one who has the know-how to be a participant or virtual participant in the activity that can claim to understand it. Understanding requires some competence in the performance of the thing being understood and as with Ravaisson this is not limited to the perception of physical things, but readily embraces intellectual matters. Hence, Ryle notes that 'the competent critic of prose-style, experimental technique or embroidery must at least know how to write, experiment or sew'. Nor does he exempt his own discipline of philosophy. To claim that a philosophical work has been understood, the procedures and protocols which shaped the original thinker's work have to be followed in a virtual way by the commentator. To understand Plato's ideas, he says, the commentator 'need not possess much philosophic originality, but if he cannot … appreciate the force, drift or motive of a philosophical argument, his comments will be worthless' (2000: 53). Hence, to say Plato has been understood means

that the commentator 'must know part of what Plato knew how to do' (2000: 53). In short, understanding Plato does not mean stepping inside the mind of that author, but being able to work through the moves the author makes and recognise their validity, albeit at one step removed.[10]

Thus intellectual knowledge is no less grounded in practical know-how than are more obviously practical activities such as driving a car, playing a sport or typing on a keyboard. Academic disciplines like sociology have their own particular kinds of know-how which involve practitioners becoming accustomed to the habits of thought and tacit assumptions built into the discipline. Though this know-how is made up of ideas, the ease with which the practitioner moves around and between them and is able to deploy them is an essential craft skill that is acquired in the process of becoming an accomplished practitioner. For sociologists, for example, having the know-how to move comfortably about in the fields of their classic authors is important as their names are virtual shorthand for clusters of ideas that have shaped and continue to mould most areas of the discipline. Indeed, because the discipline has largely dropped its aspiration to become a natural science the validity of its findings are underdetermined by empirical facts. This is not to suggest that empirical facts are irrelevant to sociology but that they play a role different from the one they play in natural science. Because empirical referents in the social world are embedded in contexts of meaning which carry within them a host of evaluative implications beyond their objective properties, empirical facts are not decisive in adjudicating between different accounts. For example, whether one describes western societies as 'industrial' or 'capitalist', or modern individuals as 'individualised' and 'reflexive' or 'atomised' will depend on how one regards the assumptions of the theoretical discourse seeking to explain them (Alexander 1987: 21–26). As the meaning of the facts is shaped by the theoretical discourse in which they appear, what becomes crucial is the validity of that discourse. Because disagreements

[10] It is sometimes assumed that Weber's concept of *Verstehen* has a psychological focus suggesting that for him understanding meant getting inside the minds of others and reliving their experiences. If this were true it would put him at odds with Ryle's rejection of the idea that the mind has been reduced to being a 'ghost in the machine' of a mechanical body. Such a view may be an accurate description of the views of some Weber's intellectual predecessors, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, but not true of Weber.

in sociology are not usually resolved through facts, but rather through discursive debate, divisions and schisms are rife. However, in order for these discursive disputes to take place at all there must be some common understanding of what is being talked about, for without a skilled understanding of what others are claiming in their discursive arguments neither agreement nor disagreement is possible. This, Alexander (1987: 27) notes, is where the classics come in.

Insofar as sociology's classics are the source of its various discursive traditions they set the conceptual boundaries of the discipline, both externally and internally. These boundaries are not restrictive, but malleable and porous and change regularly over time as the context of reception changes. New contexts of interpretation effectively re-write the original texts and further critical interventions re-work these changes again. This produces a complex layered field of ideas that open up different sociological trajectories with different underlying structures of feeling, yet still with a recognisable connection to the classical foundation. For many undergraduates of my generation Durkheim in *The Rules of Sociological Method* was criticised for being the archetypal positivist and then doubly damned as the precursor of functionalism with all its conservative implications by virtue of what he wrote in *The Division of Labour in Society* and in *Suicide*. Yet since the 1980s there has been a re-assessment of his later work, particularly *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and a 'new' Durkheim has emerged (Alexander and Smith 2005: 1–37). This is Durkheim as the precursor of the cultural turn in sociology. It is the Durkheim who sees the importance of culture as an independent force imposing itself on people through its symbols, rituals, and myths, who sees society's collective representations as classifying and shaping our moral lives, indeed inscribing them on our embodied physical selves (see the essays by, Bellah, Friedland, Riley, and Shilling in Alexander and Smith 2005). The texture of this 'Durkheim' is quite different from that of the earlier one, yet he is still recognisably committed to the central importance of social solidarity in social life.

Classics thus provide an overall coherence to the discipline both in terms of the how it understands itself, and the nuanced way its internal traditions transform themselves. This does not mean that classics should be slavishly read or rote-learnt, for what matters is the finesse one brings

to bear in the reading of them, the skill one uses to understand 'the force, drift and motive of the argument' (Ryle above). Indeed, developing one's own sociological ideas in many ways depends on the mastery one has of this know-how. One might note that many of the leading figures in modern sociology have reworked the ideas of their classic forebears in arriving at their own theoretical outlook, for example, Alexander, Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas, and Parsons.

Nor is the importance of know-how restricted to the reading side of things. The arguments brought by the writers themselves must also exhibit the appropriate know-how. What makes a successful argument in sociology is not the following of pre-given maxims, but how the elements of sociological know-how are moulded together to form something convincing. Ryle argues similarly about philosophy, declaring that the skill lies in how the argument is brought off, not in 'the avowal of logicians' formulae' (Ryle 2000: 48). This should not be taken to mean that sociological arguments need only be rhetorically persuasive for it does not exclude the important traditional empirical-scientific criteria applying to the creation of convincing sociological arguments. Hence, the avoidance of false inferences drawn from limited empirical evidence; the clarity and cogency of new connections; the ability of the argument to meet new objections and deal with contrary evidence, are all factors relevant to sociological argument. It does mean though, that these factors are no longer in a privileged position. They have to be brought together and skilfully melded into a convincing argument and this depends on the skill and pre-reflective know-how of the author. It does of course also depend on the skill and pre-reflective know-how of the readers of the text, they too must properly understand the case being brought to evaluate its quality. On this account the traditional 'objectifying' attitude is replaced by one where a model of dialogue between text and reader takes precedence. The nature and importance of this dialogical model of understanding (the classic) has been most thoroughly developed by Gadamer (1989), and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Without using the same vocabulary as Ryle, Poggi (1996) and Mouzelis (1997) echo the importance of this authorial know-how in relation to sociology's classics. In a personal account of his own intellectual education Poggi describes how his view of sociology changed when he engaged with

its classics. Initially he was disappointed by sociology's lack of intellectual muscle: 'there was something shallow and meager about its texture; the stuff was interesting, but very little of it displayed outstanding qualities of sophistication, excited me with its vigor and rigor' (1996: 42). Despite his broad enthusiasm for the subject it was only when he came into contact with the classics of sociology that he found the breadth and depth that moved him. In the classics he found that 'huge intellectually and morally exciting themes had been formulated and discussed by entirely superior minds, who had left behind writings of unsurpassed scholarly texture and intellectual substance, which in each reading revealed new dimensions of significance' (1996: 43). While Poggi is clear that for him its classics are 'the best stuff the discipline of sociology has produced' (1996: 39), the subjective nature of this judgement begs the question as to whether the claim has a wider foundation or is just a matter of personal judgement. Mouzelis (1997: 245–246) puts flesh on the bones of the argument, arguing that the ideas of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim show far greater 'know-how' in terms of the quality of argument than those of others. He contends that the classics have not been imposed on sociology as some critics suggest, but through 'long debates and theoretical confrontations' the sociological community has come to see the classic (three) thinkers as deserving of their status for two reasons. Firstly, and adopting Althusser's terminology (see Chap. 5), he argues that they offer highly sophisticated and powerful conceptual tools (Generalities II) and that these 'are useful for raising interesting questions, solving theoretical puzzles and preparing the ground for more empirically oriented substantive theories (Generalities III)'. Secondly, both their conceptual frameworks and substantive theories are demonstrably superior in terms of 'cognitive potency, analytical acuity, power of synthesis, imaginative reach and originality'. Comparing the know-how skills and conceptual tools of the classic authors with those who did not make it into the 'club', such as Pareto, Spencer, Michels, and Comte, shows the latter clearly lacking. For example, the arguments brought by Comte's 'know-how' skills and conceptual tools are unconvincing because he 'looted historical material in an arbitrary, context-blind manner' in hopes of making his stage-theory of society feasible. Ironically, the effect of his indiscriminate

burgling of history was to create a model of society's temporal development which was thoroughly ahistorical (1997: 246).[11]

Ryle, Ravaisson, and Merleau–Ponty share the view that 'know-how' and disposition are foundational for understanding generally, but there is a difference to which I alluded earlier over habit. In fact Ryle sets disposition in opposition to habit, rather than as an extension of it. He sees in habit only mechanical repetition, something that is 'drilled' or imposed, something inculcated rather than understood. He contrasts habit as second nature with the second nature of what he calls 'intelligent capacities' or dispositions, whereas dispositions of course are what Ravaisson and Merleau–Ponty actually mean by regular habits. Ryle seeks to illustrate the difference by reference to different methods of inculcation or learning, that is, habit is inculcated by 'drill', for example, learning multiplication tables by rote, whereas intelligent capacities or dispositions are acquired through training and involve the agent bringing his or her own judgement to bear. However, given that we can see, particularly from Ravaisson's account that habit involves more than mere repetition, entailing as it does a response to change leading to the development of an active disposition, Ryle's account, at least of habit, is left wanting. Interestingly, at one point he almost arrives at the same view of habit as Ravaisson and Merleau–Ponty, when he acknowledges that even training for intelligent capacities 'embodies plenty of sheer drill' (2000: 42).

Notwithstanding this limitation, Ryle's ideas remain important in bringing home the nature of disposition, not as some would have it, an impediment to objective thought, but as a condition for proper understanding, including the understanding of classic texts. We are disposed to understand the work of particular authors in particular ways. We may be well or ill disposed to the radicalism of Marx, or to the great range of ideas in Weber, or the autonomy Durkheim attributes to the 'social', but Ryle's point is that human disposition is not a closed one-dimensional phenomenon. He introduces the idea that higher-order, human dispositions are things which actualise themselves in myriad different ways (2000: 44). It is an idea that aligns the notion of disposition well with the complexity of human agency. Indeed, he notes that even the seemingly

[11] For a more sympathetic view of Comte see Pickering (1997).

simple disposition of a solid physical object, such as its hardness, implies more than appears to be the case. The hard object 'resists deformation' of course, but its hardness also implies it would make a sharp sound if struck, would cause us pain if we came abruptly into contact with it, and that 'resilient objects would bounce off it'. The list could go on, he says, but so much longer would the list be with human beings, where disposition is 'indefinitely heterogeneous' (2000: 43). He uses the example of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* to illustrate his point.

> When Jane Austen wished to show the specific kind of pride which characterized the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, she had to represent her actions, words, thoughts, and feelings in a thousand different situations. There is no one standard type of action or reaction such that Jane Austen could say 'My heroine's kind of pride was just the tendency to do this, whenever a situation of that sort arose. (2000: 44)

In short, human disposition does not pre-determine that there will be one single way of responding to a particular question or situation, but that an array of possible thoughts and actions will arise that are symptomatic of that disposition. Indeed if we extend Ryle's example, those familiar with *Pride and Prejudice* will know that the main female character, Elizabeth Bennett, exhibits more than one disposition, with prejudice as much a part of her make up as pride. Nor do her dispositions exist in isolation for they are dialectically related to those of her main protagonist, Mr Darcy, who is similarly disposed towards both pride and prejudice. Moreover, the culmination of the story involves both of them coming to terms with their dispositions, and while one suspects that neither will alter their disposition entirely, both revise their views of each other and show an awareness of their dispositions that will mediate how they understand things in the future.

If we accept Ravaisson and Merleau–Ponty's account of habit rather than Ryle's, as something akin to a skill or power to do something, we can still see the alignment of Ryle's view of understanding, know-how, and disposition with their views. Dispositions for all three, based as they are on habits, are ways through which we understand the world. They are durable and thus provide us with a relatively stable and coherent pic-

ture both of ourselves and others. They are not confusions clouding our judgement but orientations that give us purchase on things. They can mislead us, but equally they are not blind; they are meaningful, flexible, and admit of change.

The idea that pre-reflective knowledge underpins our daily lives is of course the same kind of idea that was discussed in the previous section in relation to Gadamer's account of tradition and the positive value he finds in the presuppositions or prejudices of tradition. While dispositions, like presuppositions, *appear* to pre-determine us to think and act in certain ways, drawing on the discussion above we can see they do not, but allow for a far greater level of agency than distorted modern usage suggests. More importantly, the accounts given by Ravaisson, Ryle, and Merleau–Ponty carve out a conceptual space that acknowledges both our thorough embedment in the world while recognising that the properties of active human agency depend on, and are grounded in this embedment.

A classic is often thought to be something that has managed to rise above the pre-reflective factors that get between the reader and the exceptional qualities of the text. In fact, on one familiar definition a classic is *timeless* by virtue of having risen above the effects of history and tradition. On this 'timeless' definition the qualities of classicity are claimed to be self-evident and the virtues of the classic always ready for absorption by the reader who takes up a detached, 'objectivising' stance. Unsurprisingly, if the classic is defined in this supra-historical way, it plays into the hands of its critics who can point to a range of dubious historical and cultural forces, such as class, gender, and ethnicity that are responsible for the context that raises and sustains the elevated status achieved by the text. For them, habit, know-how, and disposition are sources of deception to be exposed, critiqued, and deconstructed. Such things, they argue, distort our perception making us too admiring of the classic, too trusting of tradition, too willing to accept the validity of what the past hands down to us with all its villainies, inequalities, and oppressions concealed by the text. However, if the ability to understand a text, classic or otherwise, actually *depends* on such notions as tradition, habit, know-how, and disposition, a different picture emerges. Not only are these pre-judgements not to be lamented, they are to be applauded as the sources of our understanding. Tradition, rooted as it is in our habits of thought and action,

our know-how, and dispositions, facilitates our engagement with things including our critical engagement with classic texts. It is these roots in tradition that open up pathways to questioning a text, such that the very capacity to admire or disparage, accept or reject, or develop the insights of a classic, rests on these foundations. Only by having a disposition, of being disposed in some way towards a text are we able to hear what it has to say to us and respond to it.

Summary and Conclusion

In the previous chapter emphasis was placed on the way late and post-modernist views had foreshortened sociology's temporal gaze producing a limited focus on the present. This chapter has extended the theme but turned its attention to the concepts of tradition and habit. The prevalent view of them both has been of a negative force that inhibits progress. Scientific and Enlightenment thought has generally perceived tradition and habit to be irrational, an unnecessary clinging to the past and the familiar that runs counter to reason. In contrast, the modern world with its emphasis on the virtues of 'objective' (disinterested) thought sees modernity as the antithesis of tradition and an opponent of habit, such that both things should diminish as modernity expands.

While authors in the social sciences have generally followed this sceptical view of tradition, seeking to debunk its claims, this chapter has argued a different case. It has maintained that claims about the de-traditionalisation of society were misleading as the process was as likely to involve re-traditionalisation as the elimination of tradition. One of the triggers of this process was the way tradition conserves 'difficulty' as the driver of new forms of tradition. Attention was drawn to the underlying need society has for tradition not just in terms of familiar sociological concepts such as social integration and social solidarity, but also in terms of concepts developed by Arnold Gehlen. For him the physical vulnerability of human beings means that they came to depend on the effectiveness of cultural traditions as something which mediates between human defencelessness and a hazardous physical environment. Gadamer's ideas on environment and tradition were found to extend those of Gehlen, but

with the additional idea that human beings *have* an environment rather than being immersed in one as animals are. Where animals are obliged to live opportunistically to meet biological imperatives on a daily basis, for Gadamer, humans, through language, have some detachment from their environment. This enables them to have an orientation towards it, an outlook that is made up of the collective presuppositions or prejudices of tradition. These presuppositions not only underpin solidarity but also provide the ground for judgement, agency, and social change. What makes Gehlen's and Gadamer's views relevant are that for both of them, tradition is not a mere add-on to, but an essential feature of, social life.

One of the main constituents of tradition is habit, and like tradition habit is often poorly regarded seeming to fly in face of the autonomy we expect from conscious human agents; certainly it is antipathetic to the hyper-reflexive qualities some authors claim are prevalent now. It usually refers to behaviours that are automatic in nature and involve responses to stimuli that bypass the conscious agentic powers of the individual. However, as with 'tradition' so with 'habit'; a brief etymological analysis alerted us to the possibility that it also could be regarded in a positive light. Habit, it was argued, following Ravaisson and Merleau–Ponty, was closer to the idea of skill than a simple response to a stimulus, thus habit could as readily be seen as something generative as something repetitive. The idea of habit generating a skill or capacity to do something well was linked to the concepts of 'know-how' and 'disposition' via the work of Ryle who argued that such skills applied as much to intellectual knowledge as physical activity. Hence, we can say academic disciplines such as sociology have their own kinds of 'know-how' and the effective sociological practitioner must have the necessary skill to move around the area. Insofar theoretical discourses have a determining part to play in sociological explanations then its classics provide a common first reference point around which subsequent debate over a particular line of thought can develop and be transformed into a new area of analysis. A classic can simplify discussion because its ideas entail using a familiar vocabulary that functions as verbal 'shorthand', so the detail of a complex idea can be taken as read and held in abeyance allowing other kinds of discussion to ensue, or if necessary returned to, to clarify aspects of the subsequent discussion. Not only, as Alexander (1987: 11–57) claims, are

sociology's classics central to the discipline, their value also pre-supposes that practitioners have acquired the skill to understand them.

The same principle applies to the writing of classic texts. Writing a successful argument in sociology does not involve following a prescribed formula, but of possessing the requisite know-how to mould a sociologically convincing argument. This, it was argued, does not mean merely that the best rhetoric simply wins the day, for traditional objective criteria must also be incorporated into an effective argument; but where once these criteria would have been decisive they are no longer the final arbiters. They have to be blended with other less tangible elements that make up the pre-reflective sociological know-how of the author. It is the dialogical link between the finesse born of habit with which the author writes and the reader reads that underlies the successful sociological argument and ultimately the classic text. In relation to the textual qualities of a classic the ideas of Poggi and Mouzelis were discussed. Personal engagement with the breadth and depth of sociology's classics convinced Poggi of their superiority, while Mouzelis took a more analytical view. Using Althusser's ideas he argued that classics emerged through long debates within the sociological community where the concepts of the classic authors have been found to be powerful enough to clarify theoretical ground (Generalities II) and stimulate further empirical study (Generalities III); something that the concepts adopted by Comte and others were unable to do.

Returning to the general issues of habit, know-how, and disposition, it was noted that Ryle held a negative view of habit, but that overall this did not put him at odds with Ravaisson and Merleau–Ponty. His account of disposition was in line with theirs, but was additionally important because it highlighted its positive value as something in which human nature is grounded but does not determine human responses, which can take myriad different forms.

The focus of this chapter has been the importance of pre-reflective knowledge in social life. In the process it has sought to revise the idea of the classic text. The classic is usually thought of as something that transcends habits and traditions such that its classicity lies in its having risen above the effects of history to become timeless. Against this view I have sought to show that tradition and habit are intrinsic to, and more extensively involved in, social life than usually thought, and that a classic, like

other social phenomena, is a thing of this world, not something suprahistorical. It is the presuppositions, habits, and dispositions embedded in our concrete practices that underpin both the reading and writing of the classic text and indeed our very ability to adjudge something as classic or not. This, however, is not to say that a classic is nothing but the outcome of particular cultural conditions for we still have to find out why some texts appear 'exceptional' to succeeding generations. The manner in which they appear exceptional is something I address in Chap. 8 following an introduction to the hermeneutic approach to the social world in Chap. 7. Gadamer's hermeneutics and its account of tradition will provide the framework for an understanding of the classic text, but only after a discussion of Habermas–Gadamer debate, where two very different concepts of tradition were at stake.

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Section 3

Hermeneutics, Tradition, Classic and Canon

7

The Hermeneutic Approach

Introduction

At various points in previous chapters I have focused on the way sociology's attention has been slanted away from the past with the implication that it often regards the past as over and done with and thus something that should play no further part in the discipline's current concerns. The effect of this is to produce a binary opposition between the present and the past where the latter, including the classic, is thought to be surplus to contemporary requirements. Many sociological concepts used to describe the current situation, such as liquid modernity, late-modernity, postmodernity, hyper-reflexivity, de-traditionalisation, globalisation, cosmopolitanisation, define themselves in opposition to what went before, that is, in opposition to their 'other': tradition. However, as noted in an earlier discussion defining something as the polar opposite of something else still entails a connection to it. It is the weakness of these concepts that they rarely acknowledge the gap between what they describe and the relation they have to what preceded them. They disregard the creativity of tradition, habit, custom, and so forth, ignoring the idea that the past and

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the present interpenetrate and that these new phenomena may involve a recrudescence of things past.

In this and the next chapter I want to show that it is the capacity of the classic to illuminate the virtual space between the past and the present and to use Gadamer's hermeneutics to make the case. In earlier chapters I have referred to his work in relation to tradition, but now want to put more flesh on the bones of the account. In order to establish the relevance of Gadamer's work to the *raison d'etre* of the classic it is useful to introduce the broad topic of hermeneutics as the context for his contribution. To further develop this context and bring hermeneutics into a more familiar sociological framework there is a fairly detailed discussion of some aspects of his debate with Jürgen Habermas. This relates to the latter's desire to draw on hermeneutic resources to overcome some of the weaknesses of his Frankfurt School predecessors. The aspects of hermeneutics concerned are 'language' and 'tradition', both of which are initially affirmed by Habermas, though as we shall see in the next chapter the affirmation is then withdrawn.

Hermeneutics

Since the 1970s hermeneutics has become an intellectual area in its own right, though for much of its history it has been as a rather elusive ancillary discipline acting as midwife in support of other more substantive fields over matters of interpretation. Its origins are thought to be in Ancient Greece but there is no single starting point to which we can refer. Gerald Bruns (1992: 1–17) believes there is little to be gained in pursuing its origins as its histories are 'multiple and highly conflicted' and may extend back before writing itself started. In contrast Georgia Warnke (1987: 1) argues that it only really emerged as a 'distinct discipline' in 'nineteenth-century attempts to formulate a theory of interpretation'. Nevertheless, some headway can be made as many scholars agree that its etymology, though problematic,[1] does at least point to a virtual starting

[1] The etymological link between the word 'hermeneutics' and the god Hermes is often made but it is not clear cut. Grondin (1994: 22, 1995: 159, note 8) denies that there is any etymological link

point in Ancient Greece. Moreover, this wider context is relevant because many of the complexities found in hermeneutics' ancient form are still present in today's intellectual life.

The Greek verb *hermēuein* is generally translated as 'to interpret' and *hermēneia* as 'interpretation'. In Aristotle's the *Organon* the section entitled *Peri hermēneias* translates as 'On Interpretation' and as Palmer (1969: 12) points out there are references to this word in Xenophon, Plutarch, Euripides, Epicurus, Lucretius, and Longinus. At first sight the word 'interpretation' seems unproblematic but a closer look at its various synonyms, such as exegesis, explication, exposition, translation, understanding, explanation, commentary, leave its meaning open it to various possibilities that point in different directions. The oscillation between different meanings of interpretation is also reflected is the nature of the Greek god Hermes from whom the word *hermeneutics* is thought to derive. In Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods, mediating between them and ordinary mortals who were unable to understand god-knowledge. Such knowledge existed, the truth so to speak was out there, but for it to be understood Hermes had to render it intelligible by mediating it through the conditions of everyday life. The idea of interpretation thus presupposes there is a difference between the truth of something and the manner in which it comes to be understood concretely in the conditions of a particular lifeworld. Thus interpretation (hermeneutics) is not only a message-bringing process, it is also one that brings something into understanding. But before Hermes could proceed with his task he had to understand and interpret for himself what the gods wanted to convey so it could be re-created and explicated in a way understandable to mortals. Thus interpretation was seen to involve an act of creation, and the message understood by mortals invariably understood differently from the original one sent by the gods. Both ideas are echoed in Gadamer's insistence that understanding is always a productive activity never just a

between the two. Palmer (1969: 13) believes the connection could go in either direction, remarking that that *hermēneuein* and hermēneia apparently refer back to the wing-footed god Hermes or 'perhaps vice-versa'. Heidegger (1982: 29) also toys with the connection, remarking that these Greek words are 'referable to the Greek god Hermes by playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science'. More explicitly convinced of the connection is Hoy (1978: 1), who notes that in the *Cratylus* Socrates points out that Hermes was the god who invented language and speech and could be called interpreter or messenger, though also thief and liar.

reproductive one, and with the result that we 'understand in a *different way if we understand at all*' (1989: 296–297, original italics).

Moreover, in order to deliver the messages of the gods Hermes had to be at one with the idiom through which they expressed things as well as the way mortals expressed things (see Mueller–Vollmer 1985: 1). This problem with language, the problem of linking concepts from seemingly incommensurate forms of life is echoed in contemporary social science with Giddens' idea that sociologists must cultivate a 'double hermeneutic'. The social scientist, unlike the natural scientist, has not only to interpret the meaning of the topic he or she is concerned with, but also take seriously the meaning things have for the actors involved, even if the latter is at odds with the sociologist's own interpretation of the situation. This is because in the social world the actor's own concepts have a constitutive role to play in orienting their own actions, with the result that when sociologists describe what actors are doing, something of the actor's own understanding of it must be present. In some way the sociologist's and the actor's concepts must be 'logically tied' together, though this may be easier said than done if the two are diametrically opposed (Giddens 1984: 225–228, 1987: 30–31, 70–71).

As well as being the messenger of the gods Hermes was also a god in his own right and invented language and speech, and like other Greek gods he was not always benign. He was known as a trickster and was the god of thieves and liars; he could bring good or ill luck, sudden gain or loss, reminding people of the capriciousness of life and the finiteness of their existence. His skill in language enabled him to grasp the meaning of what the gods meant and contrive ways of expressing them in human terms, but he could conceal things as well as reveal them. In fact Socrates finds it significant that his son, Pan, is 'smooth and divine above and goat-like below' (Hoy 1978: 1), suggesting that language may approach the truth (the divine) or reinforce the unattractive ideological illusions of earthbound mortals. This distinction is echoed in Ricoeur's (1970: 27–36) idea that there exists a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion, with contemporary interpretation dominated by the latter.[2] At every turn it puts the appearance of things under suspicion on the

[2] While Ricoeur contrasts the 'hermeneutics of faith' (Gadamer) to a more critical hermeneutics of suspicion (Habermas), it is a distinction Gadamer (1988) rejects; arguing that hermeneutics properly understood incorporates both elements.

grounds that they invariably conceal a disagreeable reality. The task of a hermeneutics of suspicion becomes the iconoclastic one of denouncing the truth of appearances and challenging the *status quo* that produced them. This modern revival of the dark side of Hermes has Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche as its defiant advocates, and some now include Foucault and Derrida as part of the same trajectory. The latter though are not a straightforward prolongation of the hermeneutics of suspicion, for where Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche sought to unmask the unpleasant reality beneath appearances, Foucault and Derrida seek to undo the very idea of interpretation as culminating in a truth. Nevertheless, the opaque, shadowy side of Hermes is apparent here as well. He was also the god of travellers and could guide people along dark roads though not necessarily towards the light of 'truth'. In fact the night was very much his element as in the darkness the relation between familiar things close at hand and things far away change and appear in a new light even though it is dark. It is Hermes' mercurial, quicksilver[3] qualities which underlie the complexities of hermeneutic thought and these issues can still be seen in contemporary sociology around the topics of communication, discourse, gender, identity, and ideology,

Not all scholars give primacy to the ancient Greek legacy; some such as Eden (1997) recognise its importance but see Rome as the real forebear of hermeneutics (see Sheratt 2006: 29–36). However if we leave aside the issue of Greece versus Rome we can say in broad terms modern European hermeneutics has gone through three chronological stages.[4] First it emerged at the time of the Reformation in the form of biblical interpretation where the word of God as understood by the Catholic Church became problematic and subject to an alternative vision by Protestant reformers. Secondly it appeared in the secular context of the emerging human sciences (G*eisteswissenschaften*) in the work of nineteenth century authors, such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey, where the concern was to develop methodological principles for interpreting all texts that would supersede regional principles appropriate to different disciplines such as

[3] In later Roman society religious belief held that the qualities the Greeks attributed to Hermes became those of the Roman god Mercury.

[4] For fuller detail on this see Ricoeur (1981: 43–62).

theology, philology, and jurisprudence. Because Dilthey's declared aim was to establish an appropriate rationale for the human (historical) sciences generally, based on the nature of the human world as opposed to the natural world, one feature of this second stage was the gradual subsuming of text-interpretative questions into questions of understanding other people. The resulting tension between a hermeneutics that focused on the psychology of individuals and one that emphasised the meaning of texts was something that Gadamer addressed in stage three.

If one can characterise the second stage as a broadening out of hermeneutics in pursuit of a general methodology for the human sciences, the third stage represents a deepening of things, a digging below epistemological questions to uncover a more fundamental, ontological terrain. Thus, instead of asking the question 'how can we know things?' The new question for hermeneutics becomes 'what is the mode of being of the being that understands and knows things?' This rather awkward sentence expresses a radical shift away from a theory of knowledge towards what underlies it, and was brought about in 1927 by Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962). Heidegger's aim was to recast the Ancient Greek philosophical question about the nature of existence. He did this by approaching the question through *Dasein*, a concept that like the question itself is distinctly abstract and resistant to easy explanation. *Dasein* translates as 'being-in-the world' or 'the being-there that we are'. It is tempting to say that *Dasein* is Heidegger's version of the human subject, i.e. that human beings are the only creatures that are capable of understanding being. There is some truth in this, but it is not the whole truth. Certainly, Heidegger opposes the idea that *Dasein* should be seen in some personalised way as a perceiving subject facing objects in Cartesian or Kantian fashion. It is more that *Dasein* is the mode of being within the broader realm of being where questions about the nature of being arise and where being can be understood. This mode of being (*Dasein*) is of course human being, or more plainly speaking, the being of humans. The distinctive feature of human being is that it understands and interprets itself. Humans are unlike other animals, Taylor (1986: 45ff) observes, because they are 'self-interpreting animals'. This seems like a flat and fairly familiar observation in interpretive sociology, but it carries rather more than appears at first. It means that our understanding, experience, and inter-

pretation is not just what we do but is constitutive of what we are and has primacy over the empirical 'predicates' by which sociology has traditionally described a human life, things such as class, ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, etc. This self-interpreting takes the form of a circular, on-going process of understanding, interpretation, and re-interpretation and thus contains a temporal dimension; indeed for Heidegger it means that human being itself exists in time. His point is not just that humans can or should interpret their lives in a (hermeneutic) circle of anticipation and revision shaped by the effects of time, as though this were an option; rather, and as a feature of their being, they *have* to interpret their lives themselves in this temporal way. It is not something they optionally do, but what they are. There is no outside to time or interpretation; human being is temporal and interpretive through and through and as human agents we are inside it. This ontological process, made up as it is of the interpenetrating horizons of past and present as they move towards the future in the form of tradition, is what Gadamer absorbs from Heidegger and brings to the hermeneutic table.

Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Gadamer's hermeneutics has entered sociology through the side door, via the work of others and in support of a broadly interpretive approach to the discipline. Unsurprisingly, given that he was a philosopher not a sociologist, his work remains at the margins of the discipline in the area of social theory, but is not unimportant for that. His debate with Habermas over the methodology and morality of the human sciences drew attention to the problematic nature of the left's automatic anti-tradition stance, something it shared subtly with wider mainstream sociology (How 1995). As a debate it is regarded by one author at least, as 'arguably the most important post-war exchange in the human sciences; its breadth and seriousness' exceeding 'the lesser problem-set centred on structuralism and post-structuralism' (Clark 1990: 110). However, while the debate between Habermas' Critical Theory and Gadamer's hermeneutics first drew the attention of sociology, a number of other sociological authors have drawn more widely on the latter's ideas to amplify

or clarify their own: Bauman (1978), Bleicher (1982), Calhoun (1998), Giddens (1976: 54–70), Harrington (2013), Hekman (1986, 1990, 2003), Pressler and Dasilva (1996), and Wollf (1975a, b).

In Chap. 6 Gadamer's hermeneutic outlook was introduced through a discussion of his account of the nature of 'environment', 'prejudice', and 'tradition', a widening of the lens is now needed to see how these factors open up onto his broader hermeneutics and thence to the idea of the classic text. *Truth and Method* is a book of nearly 600 pages so what follows is necessarily both a reduction and an expansion of certain elements in order to arrive at a point where its relevance to the task is apparent.

Despite the title *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's aim is to uncouple the connection between method and truth and to argue that in the social sciences and elsewhere truth is not the outcome of correct method alone. The human sciences (or social sciences)[5] he argues, have inherited a conception of truth deriving from nineteenth century natural science, which they have sought to imitate and thereby match its cultural success. It is this positivist self-understanding of the human sciences that he regards as mistaken. Because humans exist in time their truths are historical, so to pursue timeless truths or general laws in the social world misunderstands the nature of human being: *Dasein*. Gadamer does not dispute that method is important, but that it stands in a secondary position to wider hermeneutic experience, which is an ontological not an epistemological matter. He draws on the experience of art to make the case. This might seem odd as art appears far removed from the truths we pursue in the social sciences, yet his wider point is that the experience of art is not just a particular kind of experience but represents the essence of (hermeneutic) experience as such, including what happens in the social sciences (1989: 70). Importantly too from our point of view, the structure of the experience of art runs parallel to the experience of the classic text and stands in opposition to a conception of scientific truth that is the outcome of method.

[5] Gadamer uses the term human sciences which could be seen to be at odds with the more familiar social sciences particularly where the latter have a strong scientific orientation, such as in economics or psychology. He is envisaging what we might now call the humanities because of their historical awareness which he aligns with the temporal nature of *Dasein*, but the argument still applies to the social sciences.

It should also be noted that while the concept of truth is not automatically associated with art, Gadamer believes that when we experience an artwork we encounter a world through which we can learn something truthful about ourselves and our world, as we can also in experiencing the classic. He distinguishes this view from what he calls modern 'aesthetic consciousness', where the experience of art is hived off into a separate category of the 'aesthetic', something that is removed from wider society. In this, the experience of art is reduced to being a matter of subjective judgement, of pleasure, of 'feeling' without reference to wider knowledge of the world. If pressed further in this direction art become a just matter of 'prettification', a source of decoration. The same also applies to the sociological classic. If it is hived off into the category of the 'canonical' and regarded as important only because it is in the canon, then the power of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others to tell us something true about the present day is lost. For the classic to be important merely because it is canonical is as dubious as art being significant because it is pretty.

There are several elements to this experience. First, the aesthetic experience involves an expansion of self-understanding. That is to say, understanding an artwork entails understanding something about oneself through something that is not oneself. What he means is that this expansion of self-understanding is not the result of introspection, but the effect of engaging with and being moved by the artwork. Secondly, experiencing an artwork involves a sense of being lifted out from the context of one's everyday life, but also finding that that experience is drawn back into the whole of one's existence (1989: 70). Implicit in this process is the distinction Gadamer notes between two different but related poles of meaning: *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, both of which translate as 'experience' in English. *Erfahrung* refers to the experience gained from being with others, while *Erlebnis* refers to 'the immediacy with which something real is grasped'; the latter has a direct, distinctive quality about it, rather than being something one presumes to know through contact with others (1989: 61).

The significance of *Erlebnis* was highlighted earlier by Dilthey and others who wanted to contrast its spontaneity with the objectivist notion of experience found in the natural sciences. Gadamer draws on the *Erlebnis* impulse but is critical of it because of its association with nineteenth cen-

tury Romanticism where individual psychology and notions of unique artistic 'genius' held sway. But as Arthos (2000) notes, his critique of *Erlebnis* never amounts to a simple rejection in favour of *Erfahrung*. Certainly he does not repeat tired Romanticist arguments about the ineffable qualities of a 'feeling' experience over a rationalist one.[6] What he does is to excavate a potential already in *Erlebnis*, a double meaning that brings it closer to the contextual meaning of *Erfahrung*. For *Erlebnis* to have an impact that makes it stand out from the transient nature of everyday experience, it must be able to 'move' the one experiencing it so allowing it to achieve some permanence, weight, and significance. To do this it must in some way already resonate with the intersubjectively acquired experience of tradition. It is this reciprocal entanglement of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* that enables Gadamer to hold to the 'unmistakable' quality of the experience of art (and the classic) while recognising its actual embedment in the acquired experience of tradition. The movement between these two poles, between the experience of being lifted out from the everyday and yet finding that experience drawn back into the wider field of life, is likened to the to-and-fro process of a conversation, a model that characterises other aspects of his work.

In his account of the experience of art or the classic Gadamer opposes the idea that we should search for an abstract, universal definition of them.[7] There is no singular essence that defines a classic or an artwork as they are not objects that that can be defined according to observable criteria, but are experiences that happen to us and the outcome of a wider traditionary process. We cannot deliberately choose to experience the art in an artwork or the classicity of a classic in the same way we can open a door or switch on a light. They are not willed acts, but acts that require a

[6] He is though challenging the pre-eminence of the scientific model of experience with its demand that a valid experience must be repeatable, necessarily invalidating any kind of experience other than a scientific one, including an *erlebnis* kind of experience. Though the distinctions I describe here are hopefully clear, they may be too clear for Gadamer himself still finds the concept of experience 'one of the most obscure we have' (1989: 346ff).

[7] Susan Hekman (1999: 96–98) uses Gadamer's opposition to 'abstract universalising' for feminist purposes. She links it to Carol Gilligan's work on moral development which challenges the idea that justice is one definable thing. Instead, the contextual nature of morality is emphasised such that 'female care' must be considered no less a moral matter than 'male justice'.

receptive outlook appropriate to a process we undergo rather than something we pursue in a deliberative way.

Experience of the truth of art or of the classic is at one with Gadamer's conception of all understanding as something which happens to us through the prejudices or pre-judgements of tradition. Both the concept of understanding and of prejudice were discussed in the previous chapter, however, I now want to re-address these ideas from a slightly different angle, in terms of a debate more pertinent to sociology, that of the Habermas–Gadamer debate. Indeed, according to Hoy (1978: 117) 'the present-day status of hermeneutics cannot be understood without knowing about this debate'. I shall not explore all its intricacies, but restrict the discussion to earlier parts of the debate and those aspects of it which highlight Gadamer's account of tradition, the better to show how hermeneutics arrives at its notion of classicity. The debate has produced a raft of commentary over the subsequent decades. Some share my view that in spite of finding much of value to a new critical sociology, Habermas misinterprets key elements of Gadamer's hermeneutics, notably in his criticism of Gadamer's 'tradition' as something merely conservative (Hekman 1986; Scheibler 2000; Warnke 1987). Others, such as Ricoeur (1981) have seen their views as complementary, while most have seen Habermas' critique as justified (Bernstein 1983; Giddens 1976, 1977; Misgeld 1977; Wellmer 1972; Wolff 1975a).

Excursus

The Gadamer–Habermas Debate: What Habermas Takes from Hermeneutics

The debate took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was initiated by Habermas who engaged with Gadamer's work as part of his wider aim of reconstructing the Critical Theory of his Frankfurt School predecessors, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, whom he believed had reached an intellectual cul-de-sac. They had acknowledged that Marx's anticipation of finding a unified proletariat which would transform the

world no longer bore any relation to reality because the working class had been largely incorporated into capitalism. Nevertheless, they produced perceptive Marxist analyses accounting for this incorporation, based on the idea that the proletariat had been pacified into 'happy' submission by the way consumerism and the culture industry had restructured its consciousness. Instead of seeking a resolution to its exploitation, they had argued, the proletariat pursued the spurious pleasures afforded by the very goods through which it was exploited (How 2003: Chap. 5). The problem was that however insightful these analyses were they were built on a Marxian framework that sought to promote radical change, while the actual analyses denied this was possible.

Drawing attention to the self-contradictoriness of a theory is a critical strategy Habermas uses in different contexts. He adopts the term 'performative contradiction' explicitly to affirm his later account of discourse ethics (1990: 80),[8] but uses it in his earlier work as well. The term resembles the idea of a logical contradiction where the logic of two propositions stand in opposition to each other such that both cannot be true. However, the performative contradiction is not a restatement of philosophical logic but takes the issue beyond this into the realm of intersubjective communication. It focuses on the way the overt claims of a theory contradict the presuppositions of its communicative intent.[9] Another way of looking at it, albeit in terms of everyday experience, is

[8] His discourse ethics is a theory which argues that implicit in all human linguistic communication are normative rules that have a moral dimension. These rules include sincerity and truthfulness as necessary conditions for communication. He uses 'performative contradiction' in his critique of Foucault's account of two kinds of power epitomised by two different historical regimes of punishment. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault claimed that the modern form of punishment, imprisonment, cannot be considered humane in contrast to the earlier more physical one epitomised by hanging, drawing, and quartering, because both exist self-sufficiently within the ideas of their time. For Habermas, Foucault's overt relativism is undermined by his covert communicative desire to undermine the assumptions of the modern humane view while denying there are grounds to do so.

[9] The issue is much less straightforward than this description suggests. Habermas recognises, and is relatively sympathetic to, Adorno's knowing acceptance that his work inhabits this contradiction. For Adorno, given the conditions of the modern world, there is no simple resolution to the problem; for him the task is to circle around within contradictions letting their implications unfold whichever way they will. Nevertheless, for Habermas the conditions of the modern world remain richer in possibility than Adorno can see. See Coles' essay, 'Identity and difference in the ethical positions of Adorno and Habermas' in White ed. (1995), also Jay's essay, 'The Debate Over Performative Contradiction: Habermas versus the Postructuralists' in Honneth et al. (1992).

suggested by the psychiatrist R.D. Laing. He referred to the case of a small boy who is invited to give his mother a goodbye kiss, but when he does she turns away in distaste at the prospect. The mother's loving claim is contradicted by the insincere way she communicates it.[10] It is the lack of congruence in his predecessors' work between its Marxist communicative aim and contradictory nature of its propositional content that Habermas sought to overcome by embracing a hermeneutics of the life-world, for as he remarked, 'even a dialectical theory cannot clash with an (hermeneutic) experience, however restricted it may be' (in Adorno et al. 1976: 135). Where Adorno saw little in the consciousness of the masses except the blank mirroring of reified commodities, Habermas wanted to do justice to the rich texture of actual social relations by developing the theoretical ground provided by hermeneutics. Like his predecessors he opposed the proliferation of positivist modes of thought, but unlike them he wanted to undo the idea that the reification of social relations was an inevitable feature of a capitalist *status quo*. To highlight the plasticity of social relations and their capacity for transformation he turned to Gadamer's work, particularly to the latter's account of the open-ended nature of language and its intimate connection to socialisation. Though Habermas is ultimately critical of hermeneutics he draws a considerable amount that is positive, albeit positive for his reconstructive purposes.

The business of reconstructing Critical Theory started in the framework of a critique of the (then) drive for a 'unified science' (Habermas 1988).[11] It took the form of an extended critical review of the methodological and philosophical differences between the natural and the social sciences. Until the mid-1960s the social sciences largely saw themselves aspiring to an ever greater alignment with the natural sciences. The logical positivist philosophy of science was to provide the programme for a 'unified science', a methodological outlook that would embrace all the sciences regardless of their different subject matter. While Habermas followed Adorno et al. in opposing the claims of positivism to provide the basis of all scientific knowledge, in doing so he embraced a range

[10] Unfortunately I have been unable to find the source of this reference.

[11] The original work appeared as '*Zur Logik der Socialwissenschaften*' as a whole journal article in *Philosophische Rundeschau* in 1962.

of authors from interpretive sociology and social philosophy about whom his predecessors had little knowledge. To challenge the apparent hegemony of what he called the 'empirical-analytic' (natural) sciences, he drew variously on Schutz (phenomenological sociology), Garfinkel, Cicourel (ethnomethodology), the later Wittgenstein and Winch (linguistic philosophy), and Gadamer (philosophical hermeneutics). These authors, he argued, shared a common insight that the social sciences were quite unlike the natural sciences in that they cannot gain access to the social world through observation alone. The social scientist must find another route in; he or she must understand the meaning of the symbolically pre-structured nature of the social world in order to analyse it. Moreover, this access is not something that can be brought under control in the same way that observation can be by the methods of the natural sciences. The sociologist gains access to the social world by virtue of belonging to it, and understands its meaning-complexes by systematically relating them to his or her own pre-theoretical knowledge of the lifeworld.

While finding worth in the phenomenological and the linguistic approaches Habermas believed hermeneutics exceeded both of these in the value it brought to an interpretive sociology and thence to a reconstructed Critical Theory. To short-change his argument vastly,[12] the limitation of the phenomenological approach was its focus on 'consciousness', an outlook whose confines were overcome by the linguistic approach where the emphasis was on the intersubjective, social nature of language. In challenging the positivistic idea that language is separate from and corresponds to reality, Wittgenstein had argued that language and social action were woven in with each other. Understanding a language implied knowing how to act in the circumstances of a particular form of life and that this was akin to being socialised into a society. Meanings were not to be seen as having clear-cut boundaries, but as something construed through 'language-games'. The idea being that saying something is analogous to making a move in a game. Words and actions thus have meanings which are dependent on the rules of the social (language) game being played.

[12] The argument runs to nearly ninety pages: 1988: 89–170.

However, while the linguistic approach grasps the constitutive importance of language for social action, something it shares with hermeneutics, it stays tied to the internal rules of the particular language-game. In this, it bypasses what hermeneutics recognises, namely, the dynamic capacity of language to *overstep* the boundaries of any particular language-game and to embrace and be embraced by another. It overlooks the suppleness of language and its capacity to transcend itself. In short it fails to see the reflexive property of language, a property inherent in the practice of any natural language. It is this Gadamerian insight that Habermas draws on, albeit critically, to furnish a more adequate account of social life in his reconstruction of Critical Theory.

The elasticity of language and its reflexive capacity to overcome meaning boundaries is revealed by Gadamer through the idea of translation. The experience of translation stands as a refutation of the idea that different language-games are sealed units, as Gadamer puts it:

> The hermeneutical experience is the corrective by means of which thinking reason escapes the prison of language…Certainly the variety of languages in which linguistics is interested presents us with a question. But this question is simply how every language despite its difference from other languages, can say everything it wants.

Even so,

> Linguistics teaches us that every language does this in its own way. But we then ask how, amid the variety of these forms of utterance, there is still the same unity of thought and speech, so that everything that has been transmitted in writing can be understood. (Gadamer 1989: 402)

What is being drawn attention to here is the peculiar fact that even where no adequate translation is available for something, in natural language we can still put it 'in other words' and it can be understood. In sociology, for example, Durkheim's concept of *conscience collective* is usually translated as 'collective consciousness' or sometimes as 'collective conscience', neither of which are accurate as the French phrase connotes

both.[13] However, this does not mean that we cannot understand what is meant by the French phrase; only that it requires some interpretive effort to overcome a meaning boundary by acknowledging both connotations. The gap may never be completely closed but understanding the meaning of the thing said is what is important rather than finding a literal equivalent.

What makes translation an arresting example of the reflexivity of language is that every language, despite being foreign to every other is, in practice, capable of being translated into each one of them and them into it. Indeed when we learn a second language we do not discard our first but learn the new one through it. This is because in learning our first language we acquire the reflexivity within that language enabling us to learn languages in general. Of course in the case of translation hermeneutic effort is required and obstacles need to be overcome in a way that is not usually necessary in ordinary conversation. Nevertheless, because language is the medium of all understanding, translation can be seen as a vivid form of what happens implicitly in everyday conversation. Gadamer (1989: 384) sums up what happens in translation like this:

> In situations where coming to an understanding is disrupted or impeded, we first become conscious of the conditions of all understanding. Thus the verbal process whereby a conversation in two different languages is made possible through translation is especially informative. Here the translator must translate the meaning to be understood into the context in which the other lives. This does not of course mean he is at liberty to falsify what the other person says. Rather the meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world it must establish its validity within it in a new way.

What Gadamer means is that translating from one language to another should neither involve effacing the presence of the home language nor sacrificing the fidelity of the foreign language; both must be brought into play. They must dialectically engage in such a way that the original meaning is preserved but be shown to apply in a different context and

[13] See Lukes (1973: 4).

brought to fruition as a new interpretation. The same model underlies the idea of what he means by the classic text. It is not the factual evidence in the original that matters, and clearly in sociology the factual world of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx has changed,[14] rather, it is the manner in which the original meaning of the work engages with, and applies to, a contemporary situation that matters. The illumination of the present through the past is the source of a text's classicity.

While the 'philosophy of language' and hermeneutics both recognise the problem other languages pose, hermeneutics discloses a dimension of language invisible to the 'philosophy of language'. With 'philosophy of language' Habermas has in mind the more contemporary work of Wittgenstein and Winch, while Gadamer focuses on the ideas of Wilhelm Von Humboldt dating from 1836, but the problem is the same: 'philosophy of language' abstracts the form of language from the meaning of what is said in it. It separates form from content in order to objectify and analyse language and in so doing removes the qualities natural language has of being a living, interpretive practice. The (positivist) sciences of language, which rest upon this abstraction, also separate language from the 'world' that comes to us through it producing the idea that the multiplicity of languages represents a multiplicity of worldviews and that this shapes people's lives in irreconcilably different ways. However, for hermeneutics this puts the cart before the horse, because in order to abstract and objectify the rules of a language one has already to be immersed in a language that has the reflexive capacity to allow abstractions and objectifications to take place.

In effect hermeneutics starts from the opposite direction, from the direction of the natural language speaker. It does not separate language from its living use, but asks how we, as living language users, experience other languages. It notes that even experiencing the apparent 'untranslatability' of something is an indication that we have already overstepped the boundaries of our home language in that we have recognised the alien nature of what seems 'untranslatable'. Natural language does not lock

[14] This is not to dismiss the factual evidence garnered by the classic authors, which may still be of value, but to draw attention to the primacy of the conceptual framework into which the evidence was put.

us in as the objectivist would have it; it allows us to engage with what is incomprehensible and render it intelligible through interpretation. It is capable of doing this not only 'horizontally' across current cultural and national boundaries, but also 'vertically' across time and history. Language boundaries are both inwardly and outwardly porous and their mobility forms the malleable basis of socialisation and tradition. For Habermas these insights into language are important, for as with language so with society. As the dimensions of language are opened up to the idea of inherent change, so also are those of society, tradition, and history, and via this he is able to conceive the theoretical possibility of melting the frozen horizons of modern capitalism, the issue that so beset his predecessors.

Habermas also initially affirms Gadamer's account of tradition, though it will subsequently become the major bone of contention between them. In the same way that hermeneutics reveals the limits of the objectivist view of language, so it also discloses the inadequacies of an objectivist view of history. Where the objectivist view of language conceals its prior immersion in language, the objectivist view of history conceals its prior immersion in history. Because we ourselves are historical beings through and through, and already belong to history prior to any judgements we make about it, history, properly speaking, cannot be an object for us. There is no point independent of history from which to observe it 'objectively'. To capture this idea Gadamer develops a concept that is central to his hermeneutics: *Wirkungsgechichte*. It translates roughly as 'effective-historical consciousness' or 'consciousness of historical effects'. It is related to the word *wirken* which variously means 'work' in the sense of working or kneading dough, but also 'knit' and 'weave' as well; it is also related to *Wirklichkeit* which refers to 'reality' or bringing something to realisation in the sense of it working itself out.[15] What he has in mind is the idea that all our understandings and interpretations are subject to the effects of their working out through history. There is no detached observer (subject) who can grasp the matter (object) to be interpreted in a way that is outside the interpretive tradition that brings the object to attention. History is always operative in our understanding and the

[15] For an extended analysis of the word *Wirkgungsgechichte* in Gadamer see Weinsheimer (1985: 181).

interpretation of things always subject to historical effects. However, even beyond this Gadamer uses the phrase w*irkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* which although not directly translatable, is nonetheless usually translated as 'historically effected consciousness'.[16] The aim is to capture a double implication: that consciousness is always subject to the effects of history, but that even the awareness of this is also an effect of history. He accepts the equivocal nature of the idea, but is clear about what he means:

> …there is a certain legitimate ambiguity in the concept of historically effected consciousness (w*irkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), as I have employed it. This ambiguity is that it is used to mean at once the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined. (Gadamer 1989: xxxiv)

Nevertheless, we sense something enigmatic in this statement because if it is taken as two propositions there seems to be a contradiction between them. We would expect a consciousness of historical effects to release us from those effects so we can reflect upon them, see things more objectively and no longer be in thrall to them. But Gadamer does not intend that we should see things like this. He does not see 'effected historical consciousness' as a sort of hermeneutic super-consciousness, where we finally suspend our tradition's presuppositions and achieve a new, purer objectivity, perhaps one appropriate to the human sciences. Indeed, he argues, this was the weakness of the nineteenth century romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. They had rightly recognised the significance of the differences between the natural and the human sciences, and Dilthey's goal was to establish a distinct methodological foundation for the human sciences which would be different from, but equivalent to, that of the natural sciences. However, it was precisely this positivist aspiration to match the natural sciences that Gadamer sees as the clearest weakness of this approach. Dilthey sought to bypass the presuppositions

[16] In the first edition of *Truth and Method* (1975) it was translated as 'effective historical consciousness', but in the revised edition (1989) it appeared as 'historically effected consciousness', which comes closer to the meaning intended. For a discussion of the problem of translating this phrase see the Translators' Preface in Gadamer (1989: xv–xvi) and Scheibler (2000: 63, note 27).

of tradition and gain direct access to the inner mental lives of the people concerned. The power of reflective imagination would enable the human scientist to build a bridge across time and objectively re-experience the world as perceived by those he or she wanted to understand. For Gadamer such an approach is methodologically and ontologically misguided as it involves the psychologistic idea that one can leap back into the past or into an alien culture by shedding the prejudices of one's own tradition.[17] As indicated in the earlier discussion of tradition, such prejudices are not epistemological nuisances, things that get in the way of objectivity, but as the ontological grounds on which all understanding rests, they are an intrinsic part of human being (*Dasein*). They are the enabling biases through which we gain our initial comprehension of matters, and seeking to efface them produces a spurious objectivity based on the idea that we can directly experience the experience of others. As finite human beings we can never reflect ourselves out of our situation, nor should we try as there is no outside to language or tradition. The concept of historically effected consciousness is a reminder of this.

If we return for a moment to Gadamer's quotation (above) we might also sense something circular in it, for as we become aware of historical effects so we also have to acknowledge that this awareness itself is also an historical effect, and as we become aware of this historical effect we become aware that this new awareness is also an historical effect… and so on *ad infinitum*. While this offends the logician in all of us, its circularity is not coincidental. For Gadamer it is a variety of the hermeneutic circle, one concerned with the temporal nature of *Dasein*. However, for his nineteenth century predecessors the hermeneutic circle was a methodological principle concerned with the interpretation of texts.[18] It involved the idea that what was needed to understand a text was a circular tacking back and forth between the parts and the whole. The process can be illustrated in the way we understand the meaning of a sentence. We already know and project fairly accurately what individual words mean, but the meaning of these particular words and

[17] There is some dispute over whether Schleiemacher and Dilthey are guilty of psychologism in quite the way Gadamer suggests—see Bowie (1998), Frank (1998), and Warnke (1987).

[18] For an account of the shift from nineteenth to twentieth century hermeneutics see Ricoeur's essay 'The Task of Hermeneutics' in Thompson (1981) or Ricoeur (1991).

their various shades of meaning only come into view when used in conjunction with others. They unfold together in a particular way with each reflecting back and forth on the others as the full meaning of the sentence unfurls. Something similar happens when we read a novel. We project certain anticipated meanings onto the book on the basis of what we know about the author, genre, title and so forth, and revise them in the light of what the first chapter discloses. These revisions are then projected on to subsequent chapters and revised in their turn, with the meaning of each chapter altering prospectively and retrospectively as the book continues. The hermeneutic process is both circular and dialogical.

While the dialogical principles involved in this methodology remain important for Gadamer, there is a decisive shift in his work away from epistemology towards an ontological conception of the interpretive process. In fact following Heidegger it is precisely the view of hermeneutics as a methodology for interpreting texts that he brings into question, arguing that it is but a version of a more fundamental, ontological process. The problem with the methodological model is that it conceives of the text as something placed in front of the interpreter as an object before a subject, as though what the interpreter projected onto the text were merely his or her subjective presuppositions. Unsurprisingly, when this happens, the positivist assumptions that are latent in our culture come to the fore and like Schleiermacher and Dilthey in an earlier time, we seek access to the text or event purified of prejudices. Such a view overlooks the fact that both text and interpreter are part of, and enveloped by, the on-going movement of historical tradition. The hermeneutic circle is thus not to be construed as a method to be applied instrumentally by someone, but something the interpreter and the text undergo in the process of interpretation. Gadamer emphasises the priority of historically effected consciousness on the relationship between the interpreter and the text thus:

> In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self

> awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. (1989: 276)

It is therefore the prejudices of the historical tradition not the consciousness of the individual that that shapes matters. Genuine hermeneutic understanding takes the same circular form as the methodological model, but unlike the methodological model, the ontological version refers to a process that exceeds the conscious awareness of the interpreter. However, this historically circular view should not be seen in a negative light. Gadamer wants to reverse the assumption that an objective (historical)[19] interpretation must place the historian in a supra-historical position so history can be viewed objectively. He insists that the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious circle, but a productive one. To this end he quotes Heidegger:

> Heidegger writes "It (the hermeneutic circle) is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even a circle that is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden the positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, foresight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific[20] theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves". (1989: 266)

There is nothing here that prescribes the appropriate method for the social sciences rather it is a description of how hermeneutic understanding happens. To make the idea of the hermeneutic circle clearer we need to consider another of Gadamer's key concepts, one that also brings us closer to the idea of the classic text: the horizon (Gadamer 1989: 302–306).

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[19] Though Gadamer mostly refers to issues around history writing, he acknowledges that had *Truth and Method* been written later and the context been different, his account of the hermeneutic circle would focus on more contemporary cross-cultural issues. However in the context of his formative intellectual life 'otherness' was an issue in terms of history.

[20] By 'scientific', Heidegger is not referring to any positivist notion of the term, rather to a more general idea of science as something that pursues knowledge in a systematic way.

A horizon represents a 'range if vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' and is thus both enabling and limiting (1989: 302). Gadamer uses it to capture what lies within a meaning boundary or historical situation, including the present one. It has a philosophical history in the hands of Husserl and Nietzsche, and is akin to the idea of a worldview where from a particular vantage point we have a perspective on things and can see how they are related to one another. We talk about the virtues of widening our horizons as something that will give us a greater breadth of vision. In contrast, someone who has a restricted horizon we talk of as being too concerned with things close at hand, overvaluing them because they are unable to see how these things stand in relation to what is beyond them. A horizon then both limits what can be seen, in the sense of giving us a particular orientation towards things and also discloses things in the sense of showing their significance in the way they are interconnected. For hermeneutics the concept of horizon is important 'because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand things must have' (1989: 305).

A horizon is essentially linguistical in character, and as one acquires a language and becomes socialised into the prejudices of a society and tradition, so one also acquires a horizon. Although horizons present a limit to understanding this should not be seen in a negative light. Horizons are constituted by prejudices, but as noted earlier the prejudices of one's tradition, when conceived ontologically, are the very ground through which our understanding happens. Thus horizons also give us our basic access to other horizons and traditions and are limited, but in the necessary sense that they are an initial orientation and a condition of understanding.

Understanding a historical situation or understanding 'otherness' generally presupposes a 'fusion of horizons' where the prejudices of one horizon engage with those of another. In everyday life this engagement happens innocuously, but where the horizons are distinctly different and a gap exists between the two, to foster comprehension a fusion takes place in a more overt way, one which affects how each is understood. This fusion takes the form of a tacit question and answer process evoking a new interpretation embracing both parties.

One has to be careful not to reify the image of 'horizons', for they are not fixed entities but mobile ones. In that they are linguistical in character they have porous boundaries like those of natural languages, and because porous, they are open to movement and change. In fact as a counter to criticism that he sees horizons in a thing-like way requiring the interpreter to sequester the 'otherness' of the text, Gadamer (2004: 61) clarifies what he means[21]:

> …the fusion of the horizons of interpretation is nothing that one ever reaches…(the) horizon of interpretation changes constantly, just as our visual horizon also varies with every step we take.

Thus, there are not two isolated horizons existing in themselves that come together to form a separate third one, rather there is an on-going process where '*understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves*' (Gadamer 1989: 306, original italics). It is a process that never attains the status of a final, all-embracing horizon where everything is clear, because new horizons constantly emerge which place things in a new light, something that is in line with the finite, historical nature of human being.

Gadamer raises the question himself, whether if in light of this almost subliminal, fusing process, one single present horizon would be a better description. Certainly some critics, such as Eagleton (1983: 72–73), have seen in the 'fusion of horizons' an uncritical reconciliation of horizons that should not be reconciled; one that flattens out historical differences and spuriously resolves historical (class) conflict, producing 'a grossly complacent theory of history'. He chides Gadamer for producing a view of tradition as an untrammelled 'ever flowing river' functioning like 'a club for the like-minded'.[22] Leaving the sarcasm of Eagleton's remarks aside, the point is still mistaken. Eagleton conceives tradition in a thing-like way, as a hierarchical edifice made

[21] This response is to Derrida's criticism that hermeneutic understanding was a 'will to understanding' akin to what Nietzsche called the 'will to power'.

[22] Risser (1997: 225, note 22) describes Eagleton's case as 'the most extreme misreading of Gadamer's position imaginable', as something that 'needs to be identified as such so that it cannot be taken seriously by anyone who would care to read Gadamer's text'.

up of the weight of custom and habit, something that almost physically bears down on those it controls.[23] In contrast, Gadamer conceives tradition as a living process explicable as a dialectical encounter between the horizons of past and present. To clarify this he describes a path that lies *between* two positions. The first position to be avoided is where historical horizons are seen as discrete objects set before us, and then subsequently conjoined so as to produce a third horizon. This view is mistaken because horizons are not objects set before us, but perspectives to which we belong; but mistaken also because, as indicated above, horizons exist *only* in flux. Yet the emphasis on fluidity can lead to a second mistake: that because horizons are not distinctly separate there is really only one horizon, the present horizon of a becalmed tradition as described by Eagleton. This view is also wide off the mark. Horizons are not made up of a fixed set of views, but of prejudices or presuppositions that are continually tested by being projected and revised. Moreover, there can be no present horizon without it being different from a past horizon, nor a home horizon except in relation to a foreign horizon. In fact, quite the opposite of complacency, Gadamer regards every genuine hermeneutic encounter with tradition as involving 'an experience of the tension between the text and the present'. And far from diminishing the gap, he argues that we should amplify difference: 'the hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting naïve assimilation of the two, but of consciously bringing it out' (1989: 306).

We can see from the role played by the concepts of 'prejudice', 'historically effected consciousness', 'fusion of horizons', and 'tradition', that there is no direct access to the historical object, be it a (classic) text, a person, or an event. Established notions of objectivity in the social sciences have to give way to a far more mediated view, where the truth of something is seen in terms of how the fore-structure (prejudices) of the present horizon play out when engaged with the thing or object itself and its horizon. Of course it is a familiar idea in sociology that an imaginative effort (*Verstehen*) is necessary to understand the

[23] For an elaboration of this point and more, see Bruns (1992: 206ff).

'other' if we do not wish to reduce its 'otherness' to being merely an adjunct of our own understanding. But we also need to beware of the opposite. For if we bypass the complex of mediations described above, and seek only to stand directly in the horizon of the 'other' we similarly deny its significance. Such a denial of significance is a truncation of the hermeneutic dialogue required for an adequate interpretation as it leaves our own position unaddressed and immune to change. In effect both positions are reductionist because they deny the other's position the possibility of being true. The process is analogous to the way we participate in a genuine conversation—not by superimposing our views over the other person's, but by being open to them; though equally doing the other person the justice of not effacing our views, but *engaging* them wholeheartedly with theirs.[24]

I have dwelt on the importance of the fusion of horizons because it constitutes our understanding of the relation between the past and the present, and it is at the intersection of the two that we can find the source of a classic text's classicity. However before moving on to that, it will be useful to clarify the implications of the concept of the fusion of horizons in the more familiar terms of history writing. Clearly Gadamer's account represents a profound challenge to the idea of historical objectivity as usually construed. But his objection is to what he sees as historical objectivism, i.e. where history as seen through the lens of the natural sciences and historical objects perceived as though they were objects in nature. There may be no fixed 'object in itself' for the social sciences, but we should not assume there is no object at all as Baudrillard and other postmodernists do.[25] Objects in the social sciences are no less real for existing only in relation to other things and through the fusion of horizons past and present, home and away (Weinsheimer 1985: 173). In fact the effect of history on human beings is entirely in line with human finitude, i.e. the fact that humans are mortal and live lives limited in time and space.

[24] Gadamer frequently uses the analogy of a conversation to exemplify aspects of hermeneutics. See Gadamer (1989: 383–388).

[25] Trigg (1985: 199) wrongly attributes this idea to Gadamer.

The Fusion of Horizons: A Historiographical Example

Given that horizons exist in a fluid state and are regularly revised we can see how their fusion opens up new horizons and a wider sense of objectivity. There is no 'original' text, person, or event, rather subsequent horizons project onto and draw out new elements of meaning from the subject matter. We can see how this might work with reference to an example I have used elsewhere: the historiography of the French Revolution (How 1995: 52–53). As an event it has been seen in Marxist terms as the definitive class revolution heralding the emergence of capitalism (Lefebve 2005; Soboul 1977, 1989); as a revolution that was part of a wider drive towards democracy in Europe and North America (Godechot 1971; Palmer 2014); or as a myth drawn up by theorists who downplay the empirical imperatives of 'famine' and 'financial crisis' as the real drivers of the Revolution (Cobban 1963a, 1990). All of these authors are eminent professional historians yet they do not provide us with one French Revolution but several, each of which depends on the emergence of subsequent horizon to make it plausible. It is only through the light thrown back on the events of 1789 by the prejudices of ensuing horizons that enable us to see it more fully and ourselves in a new way.

The Marxist oriented accounts of Lefebvre and Soboul[26] are based on the idea that class conflict was the main driver of the revolution, a revolution that swept away the political structures of feudalism and cleared the way for the development of capitalism. For Soboul the Revolution was the outcome of a complex class struggle taking place at many levels. It led finally to the triumph of the bourgeoisie and the defeat of the aristocracy. In the process the Jacobins (bourgeoisie) were swept to power on a wave of radical support provided by the Parisian masses or Sans-Culottes (an implicit proletariat), only to betray them and their aims of 'food' and 'direct democracy', when more limited bourgeois aims had been achieved. Soboul sees the manipulative way the Jacobins conducted their politics as the model brought to fruition by modern bourgeois democracy where a

[26] It should be added that neither Lefebvre nor Soboul formally called themselves Marxist, always seeing their work as part of the wider tradition of Revolutionary historiography in France.

panoply of devices are used to legitimise unpopular economic and political decisions. Yet such judgements only make sense in terms of a horizon not present at the time, but of one that came later: the horizon of a capitalist world. There was no incipient proletariat in 1789 as capitalism did not exist in France until nearly a hundred years, in the late nineteenth century. It is not that Soboul and Lefebvre are wrong, though there may be matters of fact to dispute, rather the value they bring to our understanding of the Revolution has to be seen in terms of a fusion of horizons upon which all history writing depends. In a review of Soboul's work Henri Lefebvre (1975: 34) makes the same point:

> The French Revolution made a certain number of events possible through a process of which it was either the origin or a decisive element. Each time one of these possibilities is realized it retroactively sheds a new light on the initial event. [And]…when historians take into account their own experience in their research into the past they are profoundly right to do so.

It is interesting to note that with the decline and demise of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s what had become the orthodox left-wing view of the French Revolution as a class struggle came under challenge, as though the Marxist horizon had declined to the point where a new current one was retroactively making an impact on French Revolutionary historiography (see Kates 1997).

The same process is present in the work of Godechot and Palmer who also project the assumptions of a later horizon onto the French Revolution in order to make sense of it. Instead of a Marxist horizon they draw on the assumptions of the horizon of modern democracy and free trade and place the revolution in France in a larger context of eighteenth century international development. The revolutionary period, they argue, has been understood too much in the framework of national boundaries, while wider movements towards change across Europe and North America have been overlooked. Revolutionary activity from the 1760s to the early 1800s could be found not just in France and America, but in England, Ireland, Poland, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, parts of Germany, and the city state of Geneva. The underlying reason for this expansion of radical activity was increasing levels of economic and cul-

tural interaction across the Western world. However, the problem for some, notably Cobban (1963b), is that it is not clear that these diverse states had any common notion of democracy or indeed were aiming for democracy at all. What Cobban recognises, but opposes, is the fact that Palmer and others have, wittingly or not, taken contemporary assumptions about revolution and mass democracy and projected them back 200 years onto the late eighteenth century.

While at one level Cobban's ideas bear some resemblance to Gadamer's, his recognition of the role that historically subsequent horizons play in the process of history writing is one of tolerance not acceptance. Although he acknowledges that historians have to select their 'events' from a temporal succession and their evidence from a 'multitude of recorded facts', becoming aware of the assumptions behind these choices is, for him, a necessary step in an emancipation from their *a priori* nature (1963a: 5–7). However, the significance of the fusion of horizons is that like the hermeneutic circle generally, the aim is not to get out of it but to get into it more thoroughly and productively. The presuppositions of our tradition are not something from which we should seek emancipation, but something with which we should openly engage; in this sense Lefebvre and Soboul, Godechot and Palmer, offer us a clearer view than Cobban of what the fusion of horizons means in terms of history writing.

While this discussion has been concerned with academic historiography the fusion of horizons applies generally. A recent concrete example of what it means is suggested by Habermas, who when asked about the significance of the events we now know as 9/11 referred not to his own work, but to the hermeneutic notion of 'effective history' (Borradori 2003: 50). The truth of 9/11, he noted, will be disclosed not by any new factual evidence, but by the way the prejudices of subsequent horizons project and revise the implications of the event. The event of 9/11 is thus not a fixed historical object, but one that will change over time according to the virtual interplay between past and present.

Thus far we can say that Habermas accepted the relevance of hermeneutics for his project of renewing Critical Theory, but sooner rather than later the tide turned. At that time, the late 1960s and early 1970s, such a project required a more distinctly left-wing orientation than Gadamer's hermeneutics offered. As a result Habermas' curtailed his acceptance and

focused his critique on what he saw as Gadamer's 'linguistic idealism' and his and *un*critical attitude towards tradition.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has involved a fairly detailed discussion. It started with an outline of hermeneutics as a distinctive approach to the social world. It dealt in broad terms with its historical origins in the ancient Greek world and moved forward to the major turning points in the twentieth century, notably those developed by Heidegger and Gadamer. Heidegger's ontological concept of *Dasein* was linked to Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic circle and thence to the experience of art. It was acknowledged that while the experience of art seemed far removed from the concerns of the social sciences, there was a parallel worth exploring between it and the experience of the classic text. In both cases it was claimed there was an experience of something truthful being said about ourselves and our world. It involved a sense of being lifted out of our everyday understanding yet drawn back into it and in the process expanding it. To deal with this idea the concept of experience was seen to divide up into distinct but entangled threads: *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. It was noted that this distinction enabled Gadamer to hold on to the idea that the experience of the classic (like the artwork) was 'unmistakeable' but also embedded in the process of tradition. It was also noted that it was the *experience* of the classic that mattered, and not some essence that defined it. This was because the classic was not an object with definable characteristics, but the outcome of the traditionary process.

The concept of tradition along with its prejudices or pre-judgements was one of the main bones of contention between Gadamer and Habermas in their debate, and this was used in an excursus to clarify the nature of both hermeneutics and tradition. Attention was drawn to Habermas' aim of utilising the insights of hermeneutics to furnish his goal of reconstructing the Critical Theory of his predecessors. In particular Gadamer's approach to language, with an emphasis on its suppleness and boundary overstepping capacities was found by Habermas to be superior to other approaches. This fluid-flexible quality opened up emancipatory

possibilities for the Habermasian project to counter the pessimism of the closed world of ideology emphasised by Adorno et al. It meant that meaning boundaries could be overstepped both 'vertically' and 'horizontally' and that socialisation would be seen in a dialogical light, with the implication that change was inherent in language communication.

In the same way that hermeneutics rightly opposed the objectivist view of language, for Habermas it also rightly opposed the objectivist view of history for there is no position outside history from where one can view history in an objective way. The prejudices or pre-judgements of our tradition are the primary material through which we understand ourselves and the wider world, and this ensures that we always already belong to history before we can make any judgements about it. Gadamer's concept of 'effective historical consciousness' was seen to capture the idea that history is always operative in our understanding. Moreover, these were ontological features of life and thus could not be overcome by a 'positivist' methodology, even one developed by Dilthey, who otherwise would be considered sympathetic to hermeneutics. Rather, it was noted that a dialogical tacking back and forth between current assumptions and the meaning projected by the text or event was the appropriate way of acknowledging 'historical effects'.

To further this account of historical effects there was a discussion of the role of 'horizons' in hermeneutics. It was argued that understanding a historical text, or event, or 'otherness', generally involved the fusion of horizons of the interpreter and those of the thing to be interpreted. This did not result in a final, fixed account, but an acknowledgement of the efficacy of both horizons in a new wider horizon that was also fluid and open to change. To make the concepts of prejudice, horizon, and tradition more concrete, an example from the historiography of the French Revolution was discussed. It showed how the assumptions of the subsequent historical horizons of capitalism and democracy had engaged with and reshaped the meaning of the revolution in different ways. Moreover this was not to be seen in a negative light, but as something entirely in line with the finite, interpretive nature of the social world.

While thus far Habermas concurred with hermeneutics, he had a different, left-wing goal, which would entail retrenchment and an increasing degree of criticism of what he saw as Gadamer's too trusting account

of tradition and language. To this issue and the capacity of hermeneutic concepts to resist such criticism the next chapter is devoted.

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8

Hermeneutics, Tradition and the Classic Text

Introduction

The Tide Turns: What Habermas Rejects in Hermeneutics

In the last chapter the nature of hermeneutics was explored and then set in the context of the Habermas–Gadamer debate. The purpose was to highlight the nature of hermeneutic concepts such as tradition, prejudice, and horizon so that in due course it could be seen how the classic is woven in with tradition as the interplay between past and present. The effect of this interplay is to allow us to see the grounding link between the 'exceptional' qualities of the classic and its historical context or as Gadamer describes the issue: the classic text's simultaneous 'historicity' and 'eminence'.[1]

In this chapter discussion of the debate continues, but focuses on the way Habermas withdraws his support for hermeneutics. He does this on the grounds that its account of tradition is too conservative and uncritical of tra-

[1] These are Gadamer's terms; see his 'The Eminent Text and Its Truth' (1980).

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dition, while its focus on language is too idealistic in that it ignores the way non-linguistic factors impose themselves on tradition independent of language. In sociology most commentary on the debate has favoured Habermas' view, but I believe Gadamer's account is well able to resist Habermas' criticism and that Habermas' case involves a creative misreading of the hermeneutic argument.[2] Moreover, Habermas' increasingly critical view of Gadamer's ideas provide the opportunity to bring out in greater depth the hermeneutic case particularly as it relates to tradition and thence to the nature of classic text.

There is, as Scheibler (2000: 15) notes, a peculiar tension in Habermas' critique of hermeneutics in that he goes so far in accepting its virtues that it strikes odd when he retracts this to make way for his critique. As has been seen above he takes a positive view of Gadamer's critique of historical objectivism, acknowledging the role of subsequent historical effects in determining the meaning of history. Concealing this connection, Habermas believes, reifies the meaning of the past which in principle is malleable, open, and incomplete. It was this opening up of historical meaning to the constantly shifting horizons of past and present that would align itself with the emancipatory ambitions of a renewed Critical Theory. Yet while he acknowledged that history writing always involved a historically pre-structured field, he wanted to reign in the open-endedness of hermeneutics to avoid what he saw as the vagaries of interpretation. To do this he initially drew on the ideas of A.C. Danto (1968) and his notion of the Ideal Chronicle, revising it slightly to posit what he saw as the necessary stance of the 'last historian'.

Habermas and the Stance of the 'Last Historian'

Danto argued that statements about history were necessarily expressed in the form of a narrative. They invariably present events, people, and places as part of a plot that acts as a frame of reference linking all the elements

[2] Habermas' adoption of the ideas of different authors has more than once led to the claim that he creatively misreads the work of these authors for the sake of his own project. See Canovan (1983) and How (1985).

together. Historical events thus appear only in terms of other events that precede or succeed them in time. If we say that the Thirty Years War' started in 1618 we necessarily talk of events that could only be construed in that way following its culmination in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Certainly no one prior to that could have used the expression. Moreover, depending on the context, the term the 'Thirty Years War' might not only refer to a military conflict, but also to 'the political collapse of the German Empire, the postponement of capitalist development, the end of the Counter-Reformation, the theme of the Wallenstein drama etc'. (Habermas 1988: 156). The hermeneutic point being that subsequent historical descriptions become far richer than an 'objective' observation ever could be at the time. In a sense, from a hermeneutic point of view, the subsequent descriptions are more objective than the ones at the time as they are able to throw light on a wider picture showing more historical interconnections.

Even if, as Danto argued, one attempted to mimic the objectivity of the natural sciences and posit the notion of an Ideal Chronicle, a fictional archive that contained the totality of the contemporaneous evidence of the past, it would still not enable the writing of history. The perfect eye-witness accounts would always be truncated unless they could be merged into a meaningful narrative. The observational language of science could, as it were, present all the facts, but not reveal their significance. Actors' own accounts are important but they only become historically significant when they are placed within a meaningful temporal narrative. This is not to say that the historian can ignore the accounts of actors, but the intentions of the actors and the accounts they give must be merged into the historical horizons that come afterwards.[3] The historian cannot become an Ideal Chronicler, a disinterested recorder of events, but must engage the presuppositions of his or her own horizon with those of the tradition that have come down to him or her. This engagement involves interpretation not observation, with the current historian's horizon being the first interpretive rung and the horizon of the actors the last historical rung on the ladder of tradition, with many cross-cutting horizons in between. It

[3] It is these inevitable limitations of the actor's self-understanding that lie behind Gadamer's wish to replace a psychological version of *Verstehen* with a hermeneutic one.

is, however, exactly the priority of tradition that Habermas wants to challenge. To do this he must find a position beyond it.

Habermas and Danto share the view that history writing is based on the structure of a temporal narrative such that succeeding events reflect back on, and reshape the meaning of preceding ones. Thus, to write the final truth of a historical event all the succeeding events and their horizons would have to have been played out; one would have to be at the end of history to see all that had gone before. For Danto, because there is no end to history, it makes any account of the past essentially incomplete. Habermas accepts the analysis but not the conclusion. Instead, he rejects the idea that 'essential incompleteness' is a *deficiency* in history writing, a view he thinks derives from the assumptions in Danto's analytical philosophy background. However, instead of accepting the hermeneutic view of things he takes Danto's fiction of the 'last historian' and embellishes it by declaring that every historian is actually always 'in the role of the last historian' (1988: 160). For Habermas, hermeneutic discussions about the inexhaustibility of meaning horizons are empty, because future horizons have no bearing on what actual historians write here and now. Present day historians write from within a *current* horizon of expectations which form a tacit unity guiding their understanding of the past:

> And these expectations form the fragments of previous tradition into a hypothetical totality of pre-understood universal history. In the light of this history every relevant event can in principle be as completely described as is possible for the practically effective self-understanding of a social life-world. Every historian implicitly operates as Danto would like to forbid the philosopher of history to operate. He anticipates from a practical perspective end-states in terms of which the multiplicity of events is easily organised into action-orienting histories. (Habermas 1988: 160–161)

Although Habermas appears to be affirming Gadamer's hermeneutic view he is subtly re-describing it to make it more amenable to his project. The emphasis he places on the way the contemporary historian fuses the fragments of tradition into a hypothetically universal history are ideas anathema to Gadamer. For Gadamer human being is finite so there can be no anticipation of universal history, hypothetical or otherwise. For

Habermas to posit the end of history when everything is, so to speak, known through knowledge held by the 'last historian' is to invoke a positivist or Hegelian–Marxist chimera, and is clearly an unhistorical stance even if it is a virtual one.[4]

It also assumes that history has a *telos* and is moving progressively towards it. Like other critics, Habermas implicitly sees history in linear terms, moving from a state of myth towards one of enlightenment,[5] with tradition being more about the former than the latter. This is not Gadamer's view, in fact he specifically challenges the idea of human progress as 'a continual advance from the unknown into the known'. Rather than looking for movement from the pole of myth to that of enlightenment he looks to 'the inner tension between illumination and concealment' as a more accurate description of history (1981: 104–105). He means that the movement of historical horizons is not a simple matter of progressively moving towards the light of knowledge, but a process that brings certain things to light while concealing others.

Similarly when Habermas writes of the historian's 'expectations' this is quite different from what Gadamer means by 'prejudices' or 'presuppositions'. The latter are that through which we are embedded *in* tradition not something from which we can posit an exit at an imagined end of history. Certainly 'expectations' are part of what make up the prejudices of tradition and will structure our understanding of history, but as such they are tentative sources of meaning-unity open to interpretive revision, not the stuff of a final judgement. There is an instrumental feel to the way Habermas seeks a determinate meaning to history which is quite absent

[4] At this point, ironically, it is Gadamer who appears closer to Danto than Habermas in his rejection of quasi-positivist assumptions as applying to writing of history. In addition to the idea of the 'last historian' as a regulative principle for history writing, Habermas also seeks to develop another regulative principle: 'the ideal speech situation' which is also in a sense 'beyond' history. In this, empirical contingencies are to be held in check to allow only the force of the better argument to hold sway. Such a view, however abstract, it was hoped, would serve as the principle for a critique of the social world that would be 'beyond' the distortions of tradition. Gadamer responded to these attempts to establish a transcendental point of view in his 'Reply to my critics' in Orison and Shrift (1990).

[5] Habermas does deal with this issue in his later work where he acknowledges that myth and enlightenment are interwoven, but still insists on them being categorically different. This work, though, is pitched against the effects post-structuralism rather than hermeneutics; see Habermas 1987: Chap. V, 1996: Chap. 1.

from Gadamer's account where it is history that appropriates us rather than we it.

Though appearing to follow Gadamer's hermeneutics, Habermas accents his account in such a way as to draw it towards his own aim of renewing Critical Theory. His argument that historians are inevitably writing as if at the end of history gives them an apparent autonomy at odds with the Gadamer's account of tradition to which Habermas nominally subscribes. At this point it is clear that his aim switches from adopting hermeneutics to trying to loosen the grip of what he sees as its encompassing and too trusting view of historical tradition. To bring this about he must find factors that breach tradition.

Breaching Tradition

Redrawing Gadamer's ideas to point them in the direction of his emancipatory ambitions for Critical Theory enables Habermas to explicitly challenge what he sees as the spurious authority of tradition. Hermeneutics, he believes, keeps us too much in thrall to the past when we need to step outside its framework of assumptions and see it more objectively as though from the outside. There may be a dialogical element to history but much of it is subject to the forces of domination and ideology which distorts dialogue. Thus whereas hermeneutics comes up against the limits of tradition from the inside, in effect confirming already existing assumptions, his revised Critical Theory seeks a theoretical position that has some independence from it. He finds two elements to have the necessary 'externality' to tradition and can thus serve as pivots for the critique of tradition: science and 'reflection'.

Habermas is in agreement with the hermeneutic critique of objectivism in the social sciences, but believes Gadamer has exaggerated the case and in effect thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Understanding may be pre-structured by the prejudices of tradition, but that does not absolve the social sciences from establishing adequate scientific method. Only by establishing a 'methodological distance', he claims, can understanding be 'raised from a pre-scientific practice to the status of a reflective process' (1988: 166). Indeed Habermas thinks Gadamer has unwittingly allowed

positivism to devalue hermeneutics and the humanities generally by making its account of experience appear to transcend scientific method opening it up to being disparagingly labelled '*un*scientific'. Whereas, he thinks, even a sociology based entirely on the action frame of reference must eventually join forces with the methods of the empirical-analytic (natural) sciences to be explanatorily effective. The structural context in which action takes place is no less a determinant of that action than the 'meaning' of things on which hermeneutics focuses. Invoking Parsons' Systems Theory in support of this idea, he suggests that a hermeneutically informed functionalism would be the basis of a new critical sociology.

While the role of science in relation to hermeneutics seems to be a methodological issue, underlying is an arguably more important moral/political one. When Habermas invokes functionalism as an approach to complement hermeneutics he has in mind not just an exploration of the wider social context for its own sake, but for its ability reveal non-normative[6] elements such as 'domination' and 'labour' which structure people's lives without it necessarily being apparent to them. In short, his 'hermeneutically informed functionalism' is the ground plan for a new Critical Theory. In this arena, what he sees as the conservative implications of the hermeneutic view of tradition will become subject to the critique of ideology.

Habermas believes Gadamer has underestimated the power of reflection, including scientific reflection, and thereby the capacity humans have for emancipatory action. Against this he argues that when the power of reflection is harnessed to the critique of ideology it will develop an emancipatory thrust that will challenge our prejudices or presuppositions by tracing them back to their origins in tradition. It will thus dissolve the automatic power of tradition to determine people's lives and give them the power to overthrow what has been accepted without question. He puts the case like this:

> Against this stands the insight that the reflective appropriation of tradition breaks the quasi-natural substance of tradition and alters the positions of

[6] By 'non-normative' Habermas means factors that structure social life but are not thermalised as such within the normative system.

> subjects within it … when reflection understands the genesis of the tradition from which it proceeds and to which it returns, the dogmatism of life-praxis is shaken. (Habermas 1988: 168)

Once a prejudgement is made transparent, Habermas believes, it should no longer function as a prejudgement. Yet the hermeneutic account of tradition implies that a prejudgement brought to consciousness does no more than confirm tradition because it can be understood only in the terms of reference of that tradition. It is this convergence of knowledge and tradition that evokes his hostility.

He also notes that if hermeneutics were to be the basis of an interpretive sociology orientated around the centrality of symbolic meaning, it would run into similar difficulties. Tradition happens in the symbolic medium of language, yet this medium is not objective enough. Language may be one key 'meta-institution' upon which social life depends, but it also is dependent on other equally key, but non-normative social processes, such as power/domination and labour/work. These meta-institutions are embroiled in social life but do not announce their existence. The mode of production and its accompanying power relations structure social life in their own ways, not apparent at the level of everyday life. Hence an interpretive sociology based on language and tradition would 'fall prey to a linguistic idealism' that merely confirmed the ideological nature of the *status quo* (Habermas 1988: 174).

Restoring Language, Restoring Tradition

In spite of his initial agreement with Gadamer's hermeneutics Habermas finally offers a robust rejection of it. Yet it is in this reversal of the path first taken, I believe the weakness of his case lies and Gadamer's account is convincing. When Habermas accepted the validity of Gadamer's critique of objectivism in the social sciences, he also embraced the importance of the fluidity of language and the prejudices of tradition as constitutive of all understanding. To the criticism that hermeneutics falls prey to 'linguistic idealism' because it does not recognise that concrete factors, such as economic and political domination, impose themselves on people

independent of language, Gadamer's response is one of incredulity. His account of language had been accepted by Habermas precisely because it revealed more thoroughly than other accounts the capacity of language to overstep boundaries and not be limited by particular horizons. To suddenly narrow down this capacity makes no sense to him:

> Who says that these concrete, so-called real factors are outside the realm of hermeneutics? From the hermeneutical standpoint, rightly understood, it is absolutely absurd to regard the concrete factors of work and politics as outside the scope of hermeneutics. What about the vital issue of prejudices with which hermeneutical reflection deals? Where do they come from? (Gadamer 1977: 31)

His reply is that they come from cultural tradition, but that cultural tradition is itself made up of factors that include power/domination and labour/work. Language reflects everything that is, and factors such as domination or exploitation make themselves apparent through language. They will happen in and through language or not at all.

There is something similarly unpersuasive in (Habermas) claiming that reflection has been downplayed by hermeneutics and needs to be seen as a lever to emancipate us from tradition, as though tradition were an option that could be left behind. There is no reason for reflection to entail the denial of tradition, as though the former were the antithesis of the latter, because tradition is a precondition for knowledge. In the account, to which Habermas originally signed up, history, authority, prejudice, and reflection were all part and parcel of the process of tradition. One did not, indeed could not 'reflect' except *through* the ontological conditions underpinning understanding and interpretation. Indeed, to set reflection in opposition to tradition is itself deeply misleading, not least because this opposition distorts reflection. What hermeneutics teaches us is:

> …to see through the dogmatic antithesis between ongoing "autochonous" tradition, on the one hand, and its reflective appropriation on the other. Behind such an antithesis lurks a dogmatic objectivism which deforms the very concept of reflections itself. Even in the interpretive sciences, the one who does the understanding can never reflect himself out of the historical

> involvement of his hermeneutic situation so that his own interpretation does not itself become a part of the subject at hand. (Gadamer 1986b: 282)

When Habermas opposes reflection to tradition it involves an objectification of the latter quite at odds with the hermeneutic view. Tradition is not something that could be objectified as, hermeneutically speaking, it is an ontological process to which we belong, not something we can stand outside and objectify. It is not a particular state of affairs that stands over and above us, but a temporal entity in which we participate. In fact in pursuing the 'objective past' Habermas restricts the possibility of enhancing freedom. To objectify tradition has the effect of blocking or inhibiting participation in it and thereby limiting future possibilities. Freedom comes from acknowledging the 'effects of history' not from denying them by claiming to stand outside them. It is only when one engages with tradition that one can be a genuine participant in the hermeneutic circle of understanding and (re-)interpretation. In fact concealing the relationship with tradition behind the illusion of an Archimedean 'objectivity'[7] allows tradition assert itself in an ideological manner behind the backs of those who declare their independence from it.

It is apparent there were two distinct models of tradition at work in the debate. Habermas' model was one where tradition consists of the 'objective past', a substantive entity that may stifle the emancipatory possibilities of the present and the future. It is a model where the past is seen to be a negative, dogmatic force louring over the heads of the present like a nightmare.[8] Gadamer's view of tradition had a quite different tenor. It opposed the modern, Enlightenment prejudice against tradition as something lifeless and separate from the present, where only reflection

[7] At this stage of Habermas' work he looks to psychoanalysis as a model to provide an Archimedean point. His concern is not with psychoanalysis as such, but with its model of communication between psychoanalytic 'theory' and the patient or 'analysed'. The wider aim is to transfer the structure of this model to a praxis-orientated Critical Theory. Subsequently he drops this model and develops a 'universalist' theory rather than a 'transcendental' one, in the form of 'universal pragmatics'.

[8] This language might seem exaggerated, but a pertinent quotation from Habermas, albeit from a different time, declares that 'the dominance of the past, which returns like a nightmare to hang over the unredeemed present, can only be smashed by the analytic power of a form of remembering that can look calmly at what happens as history without seeing it as morally neutral' (see Scheibler 2000: 44).

can shatter its malign power. For Gadamer, tradition is non-substantive, and has an implicit, virtual quality; it is the medium through which we live. As such, we do, so to speak, carry it *within* ourselves, and therefore cannot get outside it to view it as an object. Thus he sees our relationship with tradition as a living one, and one that needs cultivation so it can bring forth elements frozen in the past that will show their relevance to the present (see Scheibler 2000: 45–46).

He shares with Habermas a concern with the present, but has a quite different conception of the past. Hoy (1978: 127) notes a similarity between Gadamer's conception of the past and Nietzsche's 'critical history'. This kind of history involves a reflective detachment away from the present and a disavowal of the automatically accepted, which allows the concealed meanings of the past to become a source of knowledge in the present, for the future. This resuscitation of things past is certainly not a blithe acceptance of tradition but a means of challenging the assumed validity of present conditions. It reminds us that we are finite, temporal beings and that the present time is not sovereign. Because we belong to tradition before we are aware of it, 'reflection' takes on a quite different hue to that given to it by Habermas.

> …as finite beings, we already find ourselves within certain traditions, irrespective of whether we are aware of them or whether we deceive ourselves into believing we can start anew. For our attitude does nothing to change the power that tradition exercises over us. But it makes a difference whether we face up to the traditions in which we live along with possibilities they offer for the future, or whether we manage to convince ourselves that we can turn away from the future into which we are already moving and program ourselves afresh. For, of course, tradition means transmission rather than conservation. This transmission does not imply that we simply leave things unchanged and merely conserve them. It means learning how to grasp and express the past anew. (Gadamer 1986a: 48–49)

For Gadamer, 'reflection' does not imply moving outside tradition but involves greater immersion in it. As noted in a previous chapter, this immersion implies neither a preference for existing conditions nor an inclination towards a radical change of those conditions; tradition offers up both possibilities. It signals, rather, an open-endedness towards

interpretation, because as he declares, 'tradition exists only in constantly becoming other than it is' (1990: 288). It could be argued that this open-endedness is problematic as it represents little more than an 'anything goes' model of interpretation. However, this would miss the point of the wider account of prejudice, horizon, history, and tradition as matters that shape understanding and interpretation. A valid interpretation must clearly show its relation with tradition, show how it has been shaped by recognising the interwoven nature of the constituent parts of tradition—even where that recognition involves a rejection of tradition. Indeed, the validity of an interpretation shows itself by being cognizant of the way the prejudices of tradition are working themselves out in the very process of interpretation. Though these are the conditions underpinning interpretation they are not dogmatic determinants as critics have suggested, but the ontological guiding threads out of which a valid interpretation will be woven, albeit one subject to the on-going effects of history and reinterpretation.

The past contains unexplored riches that when retrieved can illuminate the present and the future. It is this conception of tradition as a hidden arena of fossilised riches that directs attention to the idea that the classic may be one of those resources that illuminates life in the present. Indeed Gadamer remarks that he is 'absolutely convinced of the fact that, quite simply, we can learn from the classics' (1989: 541). Classic texts can be seen in this light because they are capable of disclosing the tradition in which we and they are embedded, and thus are a resource for an enlightenment that is not abstract or transcendental, but concretely ours.

This sustained look at the Habermas–Gadamer debate has, I hope, shown the value of the hermeneutic account of tradition and that the Habermasian critique is misleading. It also provides the groundwork for a closer consideration of the nature of classicity.

The Nature of Classicity

For Joel Weinsheimer (1985: 133) Gadamer's claim that we have something to learn from the classics lies at the heart of his hermeneutics and is the presupposition to which all his arguments tend. It implies that

although we seem to know more than ever and have greater access to levels of information inconceivable even a few decades ago, we still have something to learn. Our current state of knowledge, both of the world and ourselves, has left some matters in the dark. There appears to be a sort of deficit in our understanding: the more factual knowledge we have the less certain we are how to place ourselves in relation to it. In order to move into the future this lacuna in the present needs to be met by recognising the importance of tradition and the role of the classic. The puzzling fact that some texts have been written in the past but are still able to 'speak' to us even though they were written in an entirely different era, is an indication of the continuing relevance of the classic and of tradition. Gadamer sometimes uses the word *einleuchten*, meaning to 'shine out' to describe how these texts appear to us. That they have an unmistakably illuminating quality is not alien to us in English. We speak freely of a text bringing something to light, of clarifying things, of being insightful or enlightening us in some way. This kind of experience is sometimes echoed in sociology. Karen Fields, the recent translator of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995: xxiv) has no doubt about the sheer luminosity of the work:

> I recommend this classic for reading today, even though the ethnography is outdated, and the outlook upon gender quaint, because it presents the opportunity to encounter a dazzlingly complex soul whose burden of life animates the work. It is this burden that animates great art. *Formes* has not only the steady brilliance of a classic but also a certain incandescence. It is like a virtuoso performance that is built upon but leaps beyond the technical limits of the artist's discipline, beyond the safe striving to merely to hit the correct notes into a felt reality of elemental truth.

Indeed, what makes this work exciting is that the central theme of the book, that the categories of religious life and thought precede, and actually provide the bases of logical thought, including scientific thought—and this from the supposedly no-nonsense arch-positivist of sociology. It may be as Baehr (2002: 3) suggests that because the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and others has a powerful aesthetic quality and a pathos, it will enable their work to survive as classic in the same way as

literary art. Certainly amongst critics of the classic text in either discipline there is little sense of those qualities which might affect or even 'move' a reader. I am referring here not just to the palpable, even visceral qualities that a literary text might have, but more broadly, to features of any text that thoroughly engages our attention. Baehr (2005: 6), for example, describes Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as 'Probing, passionate, inspired, opinionated, remorseless', echoing in effect the qualities of those early Protestants about whom Weber was writing. He suggests that Weber's own inner demons may have been the source of his understanding of and sympathy for those earlier 'inner directed rebels against tradition'. The Weber thesis has been challenged, confirmed and disconfirmed in myriad different ways and remains both empirically and conceptually contestable. Nevertheless, as Baehr maintains, it still provides us with a model of sociological scholarship that is counterintuitive and iconoclastic, valuable precisely because it is 'an inducement to think boldly'.

A parallel was noted earlier between the experience of art and the classic, indeed Gadamer takes the literary work as paradigmatic for the classic text, declaring that we find ourselves gripped by its beauty. In sociology one could be put off by this as declarations of a text's beauty seem wholly beside the point where its texts are concerned. Notwithstanding the truth of Field's comments, too much effulgent praise weakens the case for a classic as it relies on a private experience rather than anything more intersubjective. Indeed as we saw in the earlier discussion (Chap. 7) a spontaneous *Erlebnis* experience without the counterweight of *Erfharung*, slides towards an unconvincing romanticism. However, sociologists should not be put off by this comparison, as by 'beauty' Gadamer definitely does not mean some notion of aesthetic style. The truth of the comparison lies in the similarity of the 'unmistakable' experience of being lifted out from our everyday expectations, yet finding that experience returning us to or being confirmed by the context of our everyday lives. Certainly no one could say the writing of Marx, Weber, or Durkheim was 'beautiful', yet has any author illuminated the nature of 'commodity production' as decisively as Marx in Volume 1 of *Capital*, or made clear the conceptual relation between otherwise starkly different religious and economic beliefs, as Weber did in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*?

Gadamer's (1989: 285–290) discussion of the classic takes place in the wider framework of the changing nature of the 'the classical'. He traces the interplay between the two, identifying the former as the historical epoch of ancient Greece and the latter as something we hold in high esteem. Where once the two meant roughly the same thing, an effect of what he calls modern 'historical consciousness', has been to diminish the importance of the evaluative dimension. Modern historical consciousness is that way of thinking where everything is seen to be an expression of its historical context. It makes 'classical' something we can objectify and treat in a detached, scientific way. Against this he wants to affirm the continued importance of the evaluative idea and notes that this view has never quite subsided in spite of the pre-eminence of positivist modes of thought.

Taking as his starting point 'the living meaning that resides in *language as it is used*', he notes the common exclamation, 'that's classic!', as something that works perfectly well and without any metaphysical artifice in ordinary language. It means that one 'will hear [something] … again and again, see it again and again, read it again and again, and it will be right again and again' (Gadamer in Palmer 2001: 65, original emphasis). Certainly, in everyday life, we talk unselfconsciously about classic films, classic sporting events, even of classic television comedy shows. By which we mean that such artefacts or events or texts exemplify more completely than others, the unities and the virtues of a particular activity. They are as it were, the most complete realisation of a particular social practice, and something that persists beyond the initial encounter in the imaginations of those that experience it.

While the normative sense of the 'classical' is the important one for philosophical hermeneutics, being undermined by 'historical consciousness' has actually produced one positive effect. The historicisation of the concept has lifted it out from meaning only one thing: the unsurpassable virtues of ancient Greece. Instead, it now extends to fields wherever a text achieves eminence. The value of the classic now is neither an eternal verity, nor merely something from the past that has long gone. In whatever form the classic now takes, we find 'eminence' and 'historicity' happening together.

In terms of the human sciences, Gadamer notes that the large amount of research data that has accumulated in the last hundred years should

make the work of its earlier, less well-informed authors, redundant. Yet often one prefers to read their work rather than something more recent, even when the latter is empirically better informed. There is something odd in this as one would expect the empirical limitations of the older text to restrict our understanding of things; one would expect the picture it drew up to be inferior and less enlightening than the newer one. However, this is not necessarily the case. Gadamer has in mind the work of the nineteenth century historians, Droysen and Mommsen when he argues that we can easily make allowances for the limitations of the knowledge available to them and still find their work more decisive than recent publications. This phenomenon is not peculiar to history writing. As noted earlier, discussing the centrality of the classic text in contemporary sociology, Jeffrey Alexander, points to the same thing. Attributing the status of classic to a text, he states, 'means that contemporary practitioners of the discipline … believe they can learn as much about their field through understanding this earlier work as they can from the work of their own contemporaries' (1987: 12). It may not be correct in some detail, but sociologists accept the classic as classic because in throwing light on a particular subject matter in a particular way it has set out the criteria by which that field is knowable. This is so, Gadamer deems, because in the classic text we find subject matter 'properly portrayed'.

The rather enigmatic phrase 'properly portrayed' bears on the nature of the human sciences, which Gadamer marks off from the natural sciences. The cumulative results of research in the natural sciences drive those disciplines forward. They pursue knowledge of their 'object' teleologically on the basis that nature can ultimately be known *in-itself*. He acknowledges that since the advent of the postempiricist philosophy of science, which emerged after the publication of *Truth and Method*, this formulation looks too undifferentiated (1989: 283, note 209; 285, note 211). Nevertheless, while many now think the differences between the human and the natural sciences were previously overstated, the contrast Gadamer draws between them is instructive at the level of practice.

In the human or social sciences, we do not face an 'object' in the same *observational* way that is characteristic of the natural sciences. It is more accurate to say that in the human sciences the 'object' *addresses* us, implying that from the start a dialogical relationship exists between it and the

researcher. This is because in the human world the historical horizons of tradition play a constitutive role in the formation of both parties. Both the 'objects' that address us *and* we ourselves are formed in the process of an on-going dialogue between the prejudices of the present with those of the past, or with other unfamiliar horizons. Because both entities only exist within these finite horizons, there is no fixed 'object' for the human sciences to objectify in a way comparable to those of the natural sciences. For hermeneutics, the working out of tradition in terms of the fusion of horizons means that the 'objects' of the human sciences are knowable in a way that is different from 'objects' in the natural sciences. In the human sciences 'objects' are knowable not absolutely, but mediately, that is, through the mediation of mutable historical horizons. They present themselves in different ways at different times and from different standpoints, but do not cancel each other out as research proceeds and more adequate data is gathered as is the case in the natural sciences. Rather, the multifarious voices that make up the horizons of tradition are recognised and accepted as shaping the very nature of the human 'objects'. We have already noted how this works in relation to the historiography of the French Revolution.

The primacy of interpretation and its relation with the movement of tradition in the social sciences carries over into the idea that the classic text portrays its subject matter 'properly'. This 'proper portrayal' refers to the capacity of the classic to disclose the significance of its subject matter more completely than other texts. As Gadamer (1989: 284) remarks:

> …subject matter appears truly significant only when it is properly portrayed for us … it acquires its life only from the light in which it is presented to us.

It is tempting to assume that this disclosive quality is something inherent in the text and the 'significance' disclosed a supra-historical truth. This is not so, but there have been critics who have suggested that it is and represents a contradiction in Gadamer's work. The literary theorist Hans Jauss, for example, has argued that when Gadamer quotes Hegel to the effect that 'the classical interprets itself' and is able to speak to every present generation as though it were speaking specifically to it, he

is denying the central tenet of his own account, namely the role of the effects of history in all understanding. For Jauss, the immediacy with which Gadamer assumes we can grasp the 'eminence' of a classic text is at odds with the importance he attributes to its 'historicity' (1982: 31). Jauss believes that Gadamer overcomes this tension by unwittingly attributing an atemporal, transcendental status to the meaning of the classic. For Jauss, at least the early Jauss,[9] Gadamer makes the classic appear as a monument that preserves the same truth for succeeding generations. Like other critics at the time, Jauss was challenging the apparent conservatism of a view which makes classics the bearers of eternal verities that sustain the cultural-political *status quo*.[10]

This, however, is a misunderstanding of Gadamer's case. Certainly, he agrees the classic text *appears* timeless in that it seems to speak directly to subsequent generations, but 'this timelessness' is, he declares, 'a mode of historical being'. By this he means that the apparent 'immediacy' with which succeeding generations recognise something classic is not because it is above history, but because it, like us, is embedded in the processes of historical tradition. Historical tradition is the medium through which the classic evokes awareness that we share something with its world and it something with ours. The classic discloses how much the effects of tradition are always with us. In fact the secret of its apparent timelessness lies in the way it brings the truth of something from the past into the present, proving itself anew to subsequent generations by 'speaking' through the context of their situation. For a classic to be a classic it must show itself worthy by resonating again within the prejudices of the current horizon (Gadamer 1989: 287). It is able to do this because for Gadamer neither readers nor texts are fixed entities; both belong to tradition and are subject to its temporal movement and fusion of horizons. One might say that like tradition the classic reveals its continuity with the past, not by staying the same, but by repeatedly becoming different. In a sense, we do not wholly choose what counts as classic; rather the movement of tradition evinces in us the sense of the text's contemporary significance

[9] Jauss' later ideas change and draw much closer to those of his erstwhile teacher, Gadamer. For an account of these changes see Wagner (1984).

[10] For Gadamer's response to Jauss, see Palmer, R.E. (2001: 63–65).

and thereby its classicity. It also has a critical, enlightening edge; it challenges the existing *status quo* by calling into question the omnipotence of the present with its assumption that our current powers of reflection are automatically superior to those of our predecessors.

Despite his commitment to a broadly positivist conception of sociology Robert Merton (1968: 37) expressed the same idea in concrete, personal terms. He observed that the meaning of classic works change when they are read at different times of one's life, in effect making them different texts:

> …what is communicated by the printed page changes as the result of an interaction between the dead author and the live reader. Just as the *Song of Songs* is different when it is read at age 17 and at age 70, so Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* or Durkheim's *Suicide* or Simmel's *Soziologie* differ when they are read at various times. For just as new knowledge has a retroactive effect in helping us to recognize anticipations and adumbrations in earlier work, so changes in current sociological knowledge, problems, and foci of attention enable us to find *new* ideas in a work we have read before. The new context of recent developments in our own intellectual life or in the discipline itself bring into prominence ideas or hints of ideas that escaped notice in an earlier reading.

It is this sameness-in-difference, which is at the heart of the hermeneutic case for the persistence of the classic text. But what form does this process take? How does the experience of classicity happen? The answer lies in the outcome of the movement of three internally linked factors, understanding, interpreting, and applying

Understanding, Interpreting, and Applying

In hermeneutics to understand a text primarily involves and engagement with what a text says, with the meaning of the subject matter, not with what an author in the past intended. As we have seen, language has the capacity to overstep boundaries and thus the classic has a semantic autonomy that does not require a reconstruction of the original historical horizon as

a precondition for making sense of it. It carries its historicity within, actualising its potential across boundaries. Gadamer notes the same process of understanding through engagement in terms of a musical classic. Although Beethoven composed music at a certain historical point and in a certain historical context, we can understand the music immediately without having to interpret the historical context first. Understanding the significance of the music does not follow from reconstructing its historical context.

> …we know that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony arose in a certain context in musical history and intellectual history and is only to be understood *historically* in this context. And yet what the Ninth Symphony signifies for our understanding is far more than a system of tasks in historical reconstruction. …the work is not first a testimony to something else that we have first to interpret; rather the work itself addresses us just as if we were its first hearers. We hear Beethoven's music, and in the hearing there is a true participation, which I expressed in *Truth and Method* with the concept of Zugehörigkeit (belonging). (Gadamer in Palmer 2001: 65)

This 'belonging' means not only belonging to a (musical) tradition but also the belonging of the listener to the work itself. The way we belong to, or engage with the classic also reflects the way the same text is enlivened differently amid the different prejudices of succeeding horizons. Though belonging to a musical tradition might seem quite different from belonging to the sociological tradition, something similar can be seen in relation to Durkheim's work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995), first published in 1912. The traditional way Durkheim has been understood (and taught) is often crude and misleading: as a proponent of structural functionalism he is a precursor to Talcott Parsons and like the latter concerned with solving the Hobbesian problem of order. The conservative implications of this focus on order is confirmed by his advocacy of positivism as providing the most effective scientific methodology to achieve this goal. Yet from the 1980s onwards, as Alexander and Smith (2005: 1–37) declare, a 'new Durkheim' has emerged being brought to light by issues raised in new horizons. A careful (re-)reading of and engagement with Durkheim by contemporary sociologists, such as Shilling (2005, 2011), reveals that his work opens up onto and enlivens current con-

troversies far removed from the judgements made of his work in earlier times. The sociology of the body as a topic would seem to have no connection with Durkheim's oeuvre as traditionally conceived; yet as Shilling (2005: 212) observes, from Durkheim's writings one can derive 'a theory of the physical, emotionally expressive and experiencing body as a crucial multi-dimensional medium for the constitution of society'.

As with the Beethoven symphony, we do not first have to reconstruct the historical context in which Durkheim wrote in order to make sense of what he means, for in a primordial way we cannot understand a text independent of the significance it has for us now. This is not to say that historical reconstructions are misguided, only that they are a form of *history* writing not of hermeneutic understanding. What is absent in modern advocates of 'historical reconstruction', such as Skinner (1969) and Jauss (1982),[11] is that initial sense of engagement with a text that necessarily happens *in* the process of understanding it via the prejudices of our current horizon, something that happens prior to any historical reconstruction. What the text has to say must play out against these prejudices and only by listening to the similarities and differences between our expectations and what the text says do we come to understand it and the claims it makes on us.

For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation are interlinked. Because understanding a text entails grasping its significance now, it also necessarily entails an interpretation, of putting something into one's own words. The connection between understanding and interpretation is therefore fairly uncomplicated. There is, though a third element that is equally important but only imperceptibly comes into play: application. We tend to think of 'application' in instrumental terms as something that we do in a deliberate way on the basis of some prior knowledge. Knowledge is thought to exist in its own right and is then applied or used subsequently for a particular purpose. For hermeneutics, however, this way of looking at things bypasses a more elusive moment, the moment when we apply something *in* understanding it. It is a moment when as we understand something we implicitly apply it to our own situation. If, for example, we hear a joke in a foreign language, for the humour to

[11] See How (2011).

work it is not enough just to know the literal meaning of the words, we must imperceptibly translate it into the norms and values of our own culture. Only when the application indiscernibly crystallises within the network of meanings that constitute our own lives will the humour work and laughter follow.

We can see that the issue of application has arisen within social theory in Winch's 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (1974: 109).[12] In this he answered Alastair Macintyre's query that he found 'thoroughly incoherent' the aboriginal notion that a stick or stone could embody the soul of an individual who carried it, and if it were lost the individual would have to anoint himself to amend the situation. MacIntyre declares that 'we confront a blank wall here as far as meaning is concerned'. Yet Winch does not believe this is incomprehensible, for in our society we also carry inanimate objects such as a picture or a lock of hair of a loved one, which, if lost causes similar distress and guilt and for which we might hope to amend the situation by seeking forgiveness from the loved one. The cases are the same but different. For Winch, as for Gadamer, 'sameness in difference' is a crucial feature of the interpretive process.

Both authors also give weight to 'application' using the law as an example (Gadamer 1989: 329–330; Winch 1958: 62). For judges to apply the law fairly they must apply the spirit of the law and not just repeatedly apply the (same) letter of the law. The same law must be applied differently in each succeeding case according to the circumstances of that case. Each new interpretive situation will evoke a fresh application of the same law. The language of these two authors is different but their basic idea is the same, which is that the social world is sustained by the human ability to interpret situations in applying previous understanding to new and different circumstances. The classic text, like the legal text, the foreign joke or the musical score, has to be re-awakened and understood differently on each occasion to show its worth. The content of the classic does not express a 'supra-historical value', but is something that 'through constantly proving itself, allows something true to come into being' (Gadamer 1989: 287). The same is present when we consider a sociological classic such as Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of*

[12] I have referred to this example previously and more extensively in How (1995: 63–76).

Religious Life; it too must be re-awakened to show how its concepts still apply even though the empirical circumstances to which they originally referred may have changed. I want now to consider how this account of classicity might apply to Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Classicity and Weber's 'Protestant Ethic' Thesis

The idea that the nature of a classic text lies in its classicity has been illustrated by reference to canonical authors such as Durkheim. The classicity of an author's ideas has been related to the conjunction or fusions of historical horizons, horizons that disclose the interrelation of the past and the present. This section shows how the notion may be seen in relation to Max Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002) (hereafter *PESC*). However, through the lens of Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1989) we can see that the classicity of the Weber thesis opens up a new view of contemporary society and the significance of a wealth of new empirical evidence.

Though his thesis is often seen as a riposte to a Marxism that would make economic factors the sole cause of the rise of capitalism, Weber's account is subtler than to suggest that only religious ideas caused it instead. His aim was to ascertain whether and to what extent religious ideas participated in the wider process as the 'spirit' of capitalism. What he argued was that amongst other factors there was an 'elective affinity' or ideational connection between the beliefs of early Protestant sects, principally Calvinism, and of certain unconscious habits of mind that were the pre-conditions for the spirit of modern capitalist behaviour. Unlike much of his other historical sociology where a rigorous comparative methodology was used, the *PESC* thesis has a speculative quality about it. The choice of principles underlying the 'ethic' and those underlying the 'spirit' are particular choices amongst a range of possible alternatives. Whether, for example, the characteristics of the putative 'spirit' of capitalism is sufficient to account for the form capitalism actually takes is problematic. Though Weber was aware of the problem, what makes Campbell's work

relevant here is that it introduces two additional principles that stand adjacent to and are the obverse of Weber's: the romantic ethic and the spirit of consumerism.

Weber set himself the task of solving the conundrum of how a particular form of economic activity (capitalism), committed to increasing material wealth and to which religious beliefs were irrelevant, could have emerged from a set of Puritan religious ideas that detested the accumulation of wealth for its own sake. More abstractly, he poses the question, how can sociology explain the connection between two qualitatively different entities that belong to different categories of reality: a form of economic organisation based on 'material' things, and a set of deeply held non-material religious beliefs based on 'spiritual' things?

To do this he argues that the spirit of (early) capitalism is not about the acquisition of wealth and luxury *per se*, but the disciplined obligation to work in a dutiful fashion. It is the pursuit of wealth in a systematic way beyond the satisfaction of needs *without* the indulgence of pleasure that characterises the spirit of capitalism. This spirit enables capitalist economic enterprise to thrive by not siphoning off profits but reinvesting them and acting in a calculative manner to plan and predict further economic activity. Its origins lie in early Protestant beliefs that one should work single-mindedly and systematically for the greater glory of God. Though its religious roots were gradually left behind, the pursuit of God's grace through hard work on His earth, Weber maintained, bore an elective affinity with the equally single-minded modern capitalist spirit where rational-calculative procedures were applied to the making of profit.

The *PESC* has over the years been challenged on a variety of different grounds including the empirical grounds that there have been Protestant countries where capitalism did not develop and Catholic countries where it did develop. This criticism is a truncation of the thesis however, as Weber made it clear that this connection represented only one possible causal link in the process tending towards the emergence of capitalism. If we recall Gadamer's argument that empirical evidence is not the only criterion for judging a classic, then it could be that the continuing interest this text evokes is because many sociologists intuitively recognise that the current world in some ways still resembles the world Weber described. There is something convincing in the idea that a certain Puritan methodi-

cal hard work, unconscious of its religious foundations, is still a key to happiness. In everyday life, as a route to happiness we talk about the need to 'work on our relationships', of 'working through' our emotional problems, of going to the gym for a 'workout' even in our leisure time. People have five year plans on which they need to 'work' so they can be sure of fulfilling their potential.

However, while certain elements of the Weber thesis throw light on the present, Campbell takes a much larger view and sets out to show how the value of the thesis can be strengthened and amplified. He acknowledges that sociologists hold Weber in high esteem but believes they are usually more eager to write about him than to emulate the breadth of his sociology. The best way to honour the great man, he avers, is to imitate him and not simply praise him. He presents his work as both a compliment and a complement to Weber's essay. Though he makes adjustments to some of Weber's claims there is nothing in these modifications, he maintains, that are 'in any way fatal to Weber's argument'. Rather, the principles Campbell invokes, though the terms he uses are different, are the opposite side of the same principles Weber uses and are essential to 'resolve many long standing problems' his thesis entails (Campbell 1989: 9).

He starts from a problem evoked by the contemporary horizon of consumerism, noting that the Western world's high level of consumption seems to fly in the face of Weber's idea that capitalism presupposes a work ethic that is an end in itself, and involves the 'avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment' of accumulated wealth. The consumer boom of the last fifty years would appear to make the Weber thesis obsolete. There has also been a tendency in economic history writing to focus on production rather than consumption as the transformation that was wrought by the Industrial Revolution. However, you cannot have a dramatic rise in production without a concomitant rise in consumption. There has to be an account of a Consumer Revolution to match accounts of the Industrial Revolution for either account to be convincing. The lop-sidedness of the equation is addressed by Campbell through the introduction and description of a modern hedonistic spirit of consumerism. He places this alongside the modern calculative spirit of capitalism, noting their interconnections and tracing consumerism's history back to a Romantic

Ethic. This Romantic Ethic is then described as being the obverse of the Protestant Ethic and interconnections are drawn back and forth between all four cultural principles: Protestant Ethic, Capitalist spirit, Romantic Ethic, Consumer Spirit.

One cannot do justice here to the extensiveness of the argument that Campbell brings, or to the weight of evidence he marshals to show the interconnections that exist horizontally, vertically, and diagonally between the four principles. The aim of this example is to show how the assumptions of our contemporary horizon can be brought to bear in such a way as to disclose the classicity of Weber's text rather than to see it dismissed as out of date and no longer relevant. In effect the emergence of a subsequent consumerist horizon has evoked a new awareness of the validity of a much criticised classic allowing it to shine out again.

Though I have regularly used the term 'classic text' it could be thought misleading as the thrust of the argument is not with the idea that there are given texts with particular qualities, but with the idea of classicity: the possibility of something being classical. Nevertheless, critics opposed to the role played by classics point to the way certain texts are canonised and thence uncritically passed down from one generation to the next. Canons, they argue, provide a network of ideological support that keeps an admiring gaze focused on certain classics and away from others not included in the canon. Such criticism, however, I believe conflates two different entities: the classic and the canon. It is to the importance of the differences between these two that I will turn in the next chapter.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter followed the discussion of Gadamer's debate with Habermas further, noting that the latter gradually started to revise certain concepts, pulling them away from hermeneutics to make them more amenable to Critical Theory. Drawing on Danto's notion of the Ideal Chronicle as an archive where all evidence contemporaneous with an historical event could be held, Habermas followed Danto's judgement that such data would still not enable the historian to write history. It would enable the historian to 'tell it like it was', but to write history required evidence to

be placed within a narrative where the significance of subsequent events could be shown to reflect back on and alter the meaning of the original event. In the absence of knowing what the future holds meant that in Danto's terms our understanding of the past would always be incomplete. Such a view, it was noted, was well aligned with the hermeneutic view. However, unhappy that this conclusion left the meaning of history too open-ended and would limit the potential for critique, Habermas posits the idea that every historian actually writes as if s/he were the 'last historian' at the end of history and able in principle to view everything. This subtle re-orientation of Danto's Ideal Chronicle posited the idea that hermeneutics needed to acknowledge a virtual position beyond history, at the end of history. Yet, the rejection of such an objectivist outlook was exactly the reason why Habermas adopted the hermeneutic approach in the first place.

We saw that Habermas pursued the theme of breaching historical tradition in other ways as well. He argued that science had the capacity to stand outside tradition and that a critical social science would need to adopt the principles of a structural-functionalist approach to show how systemic factors structured people's lives independent of their cultural tradition. This was so, he argued, because power and domination worked behind the backs of social actors in an ideological fashion. Similarly, an interpretive (hermeneutic) sociology based around the centrality of language in everyday life would fail to see the way that this language was itself shaped by factors deriving from the mode of production, such as work and exploitation, and would thus fall prey to 'linguistic idealism'. But perhaps the most serious flaw in the hermeneutic account as Habermas saw it was its underestimation of the power of reflection to break through and dissolve the inherited accretions of tradition. Reflection, he declared, had the power to dispel the quasi-natural power of tradition and to fulfil its emancipatory potential by tracing back prejudices to their origin in tradition, thereby melting away their invisible powers to dominate.

To address these criticisms and elaborate the strength of Gadamer's ideas, the discussion moved to the task of restoring the concepts of language and tradition and bringing them to bear on the wider task in hand of addressing the nature of the classic text. It was noted that Habermas had accepted the hermeneutic view of language and thus to claim that

factors such as domination and exploitation were outside its remit was misleading. These things are as much a part of the language tradition as anything else and as such are subject to language's capacity to surpass the limitations of any particular horizon, including ideological horizons. Indeed, without the intrinsic capacity of language to embrace *and* see beyond an existing horizon all hopes for radical change, including the hopes of Critical Theory would abate. The economic forces that make up the mode of production might well structure people's lives and their effects appear as the prejudices or presuppositions of our tradition, but such prejudices are the essential grist to the mill of hermeneutics.

In the same vein, but in relation to reflection Habermas had accepted the concepts of prejudice, horizon, tradition, and so forth. There is thus something flawed in his claim that reflection necessarily stands opposed to tradition. He had argued that it was the power of reflection, which when allied to the knowledge garnered by Critical Theory, would enable tradition to be dissolved and emancipation ensue. However, insofar as Gadamer's concepts had been recognised and found apt, then reflection would necessarily be something that happened *within* tradition, a tradition would thus be furthered through the process of reflection. This would be the case because one can only reflect in and through the ontological conditions of understanding, that is, through interpreting and reinterpreting the prejudices of past and present horizons. Moreover, to objectify tradition in order to try and dissolve its effects, as Habermas sought to do, would inhibit participation and change rather than enhance it because emancipation comes from acknowledging 'historical effects', not from denying them. In light of his criticism it was surprising to note that as recently as 2003 Habermas had been happy to apply the concept of 'effective historical consciousness' to the meaning of 9/11.

It is apparent that Habermas was using a different model of tradition to the hermeneutic one, even though he appeared to have adopted it. He increasingly conceived of tradition as a separate entity: an 'objective past', which for him was essentially a negative force that suffocated the emancipatory hopes of modernity. However, for Gadamer tradition was not a substantive object at all, but the medium through which we live; something we as human beings carry within us and which, if allowed, will show its relevance to the present. His model of tradition was differ-

ent from the one presumed by Habermas, but seen instead to be closer to Nietzsche's 'critical history'. It involved a reflection away from the present rather than away from the past, allowing the significance of the past to enter the contemporary picture and challenge the validity of present assumptions. Hence, far from Gadamer's 'tradition' being uncritical, it offers a critique of the current *status quo* in recognising that human beings are not the sovereign authors of their own present lives, but 'belong' to their tradition before they know it. It is the space wrought by this idea that allows the relevance of the classic to appear. Insofar as the classic still resonates with the present it allows us to see how much we share with the past and it with us.

Discussion then moved to explore classicity more closely. It was noted that some texts have the odd capacity to illuminate the present even though they were written long ago, in a different context and for a different audience. With the rapid growth in factual knowledge in sociology in recent times one would expect texts from the past to look inadequate or just plain old fashioned. But this is not necessarily so. Gadamer framed his account of this issue in terms of the nineteenth century historians Droysen and Mommsen, stating that we can easily make allowances for the limitations of their work in terms of factual knowledge and still find reading them more rewarding than recent work that is empirically better informed. Alexander (1987: 12) declares that the same thing can also be seen in sociology where authors refer back to a classic because it throws light on a particular subject matter. It is an idea we also find in Gadamer, who refers to this phenomenon as subject matter 'properly portrayed'. The 'objects' of the social sciences are not addressed in the same observational way as in the natural sciences; they presuppose a more dialogical relation. This is because these 'objects' are knowable through the horizons of our historical tradition and the multifarious voices that make it up. Only certain authors and texts are able to 'properly portray' this subject matter so that its significance can appear and reappear, albeit differently through the conduit of those changing horizons.

The dialogical nature of the relation between past and present as disclosed by the sociological classic is made clear by Alexander and Smith (2005: Chap. 1) who explain it in relation to what they call 'the new Durkheim'. They note that when the work of certain authors is seen to

have staying power something intriguing happens. Interpretations and re-interpretations that are subject to 'historical effects' follow and proliferate in a way that could not have been intended or predicted by the author. In fact the dialogical quality of the relationship becomes apparent as 'time reverses the direction of influence' (2005: 1). Instead of the original text influencing the contemporary reader, the contemporary reader influences the original, reshaping its meaning in the light of contemporary issues. In effect the contemporary horizon of interpretation 'rewrites' what is in the text and interventions produce a rich new layer of meaning. The words, ideas, analytic choices, and underlying structures of feeling that the contemporary sociologist brings to bear, accumulate around the original with increasing complexity culminating in a text being regarded as classic. What is striking about this is how far removed a topic can be from what the original author might have had in mind, yet still be recognisable as belonging to his or her legacy. The sociology of the body, for example, is a field of enquiry that has developed only recently and which would seem to have little to do with the work of Émile Durkheim. Yet as Shilling (2005, 2011) has shown, Durkheim's work, whether he intended it or not, gives the body a central role in sustaining social integration, which in effect means keeping society running on a daily basis. This is because the body is the very medium for reproducing the symbolic order that constitutes the solidarity so necessary for effective social life. Durkheim's concept of *Homo duplex* acknowledges that humans have two bodies, a biological body and a social body. While the biological body is constituted by physical drives, appetites, and sensory impressions, the social one is no less physical, but constituted by the collective symbolic meanings imprinted on it through adornment, painting, dress, hair style, physical gait, and so on. Thus topics that have emerged recently within the contemporary horizon of sociology concerned with the body such as 'gender', 'identity', and 'the body as a creative project', can still be illuminated through the classic text of a hundred years ago. As noted earlier in the chapter, the classic preserves something true from the past into the present and to do this it has to constantly prove its classicity anew to each succeeding generation. It must come alive again within the framework of the current horizon of prejudices. In this the classic is not something merely from the past superimposed on the present, but something able

to 'properly portray' a topic so that it can speak afresh to the issues of a new context.

In order to make these ideas more concrete the discussion explored the inner connection between understanding, interpreting, and applying. It was argued that understanding a classic involved an engagement with the significance of a text and that this did not require the reconstruction of the historical context. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was composed in a particular historical situation, but when we hear it we grasp its musical significance in the here and now. Similarly, Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* was written over a century ago, but to show its classicity it has to reveal its significance to the present, something that Shilling has sought to do. The implication is that understanding something involves interpreting its significance through contemporary sensibilities, which in effect means putting something in our own words.

Linked to understanding and interpreting was the concept of applying. It was necessary to draw the meaning of this concept away from its familiar sense of being an instrumental activity, and towards the idea that when we understand something we automatically apply it to our own situation. In fact *in* understanding something we tacitly apply it to our own situation. Several examples of different kinds were given: understanding a foreign language joke; Winch's account of understanding aspects of a primitive society; application of the law across time and most pertinent from our point of view, the application of a sociological classic to the contemporary world; namely Shilling's recovery of Durkheim's work as a resource informing the sociology of the body. In the last section Campbell's reworking of the Weber thesis was used to show how the contemporary horizon of consumerism could be used to interrogate and reawaken the virtues of Weber's famous work on the 'Protestant Ethic', extending and amplifying its explanatory power.

The focus of the chapter has not been on the classic text as such, but on the nature of classicness or classicity. However critics of the classic in sociology and elsewhere interpose the significance of the canon as something that produces an uncritical acceptance of texts that have been deemed classic, and provides unjustified ideological support; it is an issue addressed in the next chapter.

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9

Canons and Their Discontents

Introduction

In the previous chapter attention was focused on the nature of classicity and the manner in which it emerges through the working out of historical horizons. As such the focus was not on the classic text *per se* but on the process that underpins its possibility. While Gadamer (1989: 577) confirms that his account was 'not concerned with some canon of content' held by the classics, critics have nevertheless pointed to the role played by canons in what is to be regarded as worthy of special attention. According to critics not only do canons preselect what is to count as 'great' in a discipline, but they also effectively act as instruments of exclusion, tacitly removing from the curriculum voices that stand in contrast to those deemed canonical. Canons are seen as representing the interests of social and political power, reinforcing ethnic, gender, and class assumptions. Its exclusions and silences conceal the collusion classic authors have with the repressive hierarchies of their time. In 'Why is Classical Theory Classical?', R.W. Connell (1997: 1511–1157) uses the principles of social constructionism to present a particularly powerful challenge to the validity of the sociological canon, arguing that it is part of the discipline's

A.R. How, *Restoring the Classic in Sociology*,
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originary myth serving to unify and legitimise an otherwise fragmentary and morally dubious project. The story sociology mistakenly tells itself is that in response to the advent of modernity and its disruptive changes, the intellectual founders of the discipline produced exemplary texts which have defined the nature of sociology and should continue to do so. They have come to determine what is to count as an issue worth speaking of, as well as shaping the vocabulary in which it is spoken about. When academics and their students comb through the work of classic authors they perform a ritual of canonical reinforcement demonstrating their membership of, and deference to, the sociological tradition.

Connell believes that the notion of the sociological tradition being kick-started by a small group of authors, whose exemplary work shines down the years like a beacon, is no more than a latter day invention, when in reality it was the outcome of historical contingency. At the time of their main writings Weber, Marx, and Durkheim were held in neither low nor high esteem, but regarded as being amongst a variety of other authors contributing to a discipline that was developing encyclopaedically through slow accretion, not canonically through inspiration. The loss of faith in progress after the First World War left a vacuum in sociology which was ultimately replenished in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s when the idea of progress was supplanted by a focus on the more neutral 'society' and the Hobbesian problem of order. However, the failure of American sociology to gain cultural legitimacy for its research findings, coupled with the institutional expansion of the discipline in the post-war period, led to the need for an intellectual canon to sustain a core for the discipline. The canon emerged, Connell argues, through the preferences of Talcott Parsons, Lewis Coser, and C. Wright Mills, who enhanced their reputations by defining and sometimes translating works they regarded as classic. It was the choice of these authors within a context of need that generated the canon as we know it. It was they who decided which author was 'in' and which 'out' of the canon. Thus for Connell the canon has done little more than serve an integrative function, providing a reassuring symbolic centrepiece with which sociologists can identify. Teaching the work of classic authors to students and getting them to replay their findings back to the discipline's gatekeepers, allows undergraduate assignments to trigger a common sense of understanding and purpose that

holds the discipline together. In effect, Connell implies that sociology's classical canon functions as holy books do in a religious canon.

Clearly at face value Connell's critique puts an emphatic question mark against sociology's canon of classic authors. I do not wish to answer its detailed claims point by point as Randall Collins (1997: 1558–1564) has already done that.[1] Notwithstanding this, one response to the criticism that the canon merely provides a ritualistic centrepiece for the discipline is that it is unremarkable, as all academic disciplines have similar practices through which they define themselves. They have stores of knowledge, craft skills, and domain assumptions which are regularly transmitted to their students, and regard it as important that these are relayed back in the appropriate register to indicate their value has been understood. Philosophy and English literature both have a core set of authors and texts they regard as centrally important. Psychology and History have developed somewhat differently; they define themselves in terms of 'experimental method' and 'documentary evidence', respectively. They might make reference to eminent predecessors but 'experiments' and 'documents' perform an integrative function for them. Understanding something sociological, literary, philosophical, historical, or psychological presupposes a tacit backdrop of common assumptions, which may never be fully open to inspection, but provides a necessary canopy of unspoken agreement enabling the discipline to 'go on' on a daily basis. It may be the outcome of historical contingency and be subject challenge, as Connell and others demonstrate, but that does not invalidate its role.

Similarly, we should not be surprised to find that the choices of later sociologists formed the canon rather than the instantly recognisable qualities of classic authors. Authors rarely achieve classic status in their own lifetime as the competition to get their voices heard is great and the vagaries of intellectual life means that reputations regularly rise and fall. A reputation for having something to say worth returning to, according to Collins takes roughly three generations to establish. In his *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998) he details how reputation-chains based on interac-

[1] There is considerably more detail to Connell's article that these comments suggest, including supporting empirical evidence about gender and ethnicity. The article is forty-six pages long.

tion rituals establish the status of key philosophers across millennia, but makes clear these are not arbitrary. In the end authors have reputations because their ideas hold the interest of others, implying that subsequent generations recognise the creativity of these ideas. In sociology the establishment of classic authors is the result of interminable debates between members of the academic community to establish the validity of one way of 'going on' over another. Parsons, Mills, and Coser may have been carving out their own careers when they made their classic choices, but they were also trying to establish the validity of a particular set of concepts that would throw light on an area of social life otherwise in the shade. The classic should enable us to 'see' something that was not possible before. It also means having a vocabulary with the imaginative reach to provoke further questions and through which we can pursue empirical issues. To use the terminology of Althusser as we did previously, the work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim is to be found at Generality II as a set of conceptual tools that enable their eponymous sociologies to emerge at Generality III.

However, beyond the contingencies of canon formation, Connell points to the moral dubiousness of sociology's canon, which he contends conceal its Eurocentric and tacitly imperialist origins. As a corollary of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial expansion much sociology was built around the distinction between primitive and modern societies involving a tacit celebration of a European 'march of progress'. As a result of this 'before' and 'after' distinction, European societies it was assumed, had arrived at the desirable condition of modernity, while primitive societies were lagging behind somewhere along the route and by implication were unenlightened if not uncivilised. In a manner reminiscent of Foucault's unmasking of the human sciences in *The Order of Things*, Connell seeks to show that from the outset sociology took up an 'objectivating gaze', classifying innumerable distinctions between pre-modern and modern societies. The production of taxonomies and typologies of social behaviour, of comparing and contrasting institutions, mirrors Foucault's claim that the human sciences are part of the same *episteme* as the natural sciences. The 'penetrating gaze' of biology is, Connell believes, as present in early sociology as it is in anatomy; both are oriented towards control and regulation.

There is no doubt that the prejudices or presuppositions of nineteenth century historical horizons underpinned the worldview of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, but no less than current ones underpin ours. Hence it is unsurprising that their work carries the marks of some of the assumptions we no longer accept. However, it is what these authors did with their assumptions that matters. Their work has not been placed above critical suspicion, indeed critiques of their work have gone on apace throughout sociology's history. Carrying the marks of an earlier era is not a reason to remove their work from the curriculum as there is ample evidence that their ideas still inspire analyses today. Moreover, the history of sociology does not confirm the *epistemic* unity of the human sciences and the natural sciences via their 'objectivating gaze'. There has long been a challenge to positivist assumption in sociology, from the work of Weber, Schutz, and Mead to Goffman, Garfinkel, and the Frankfurt School.[2]

It is relevant to note, as Collins (1997: 1560) does that Connell 'ignores the analytical content of theories' in order to show sociology at its worst. Quite a different picture emerges when the content of classic work is looked at more closely. Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, for example, is not an evolutionist tract about the superiority of modern colonials against the elementary naivety of Australian aboriginals; in many ways it is the opposite. It is an analysis of their rituals as an exemplar of moral integration and concept formation in *all* societies. In fact, Durkheim (1995/1912: 1) declared that the aim of this work was to study 'a very archaic religion… [in order] … to arrive at an understanding of present day humanity'. So as to disabuse any imperialist voyeurs about his aim, he made clear that the purpose of the task was 'to explain a present reality that is near to us and capable of affecting our ideas and actions, not for the sheer pleasure of recounting the bizarre and the eccentric' Like Levi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (1966), this classic is not about how far removed we are from a primitive mentality, but how much we share in common with it. It is about

[2] In response to Foucault's unmasking of the human sciences, Habermas (1987: 272–273) notes that he drops this theme in his later work, as by the 1970s objectifying approaches no longer dominated the field, being replaced by hermeneutical and critical approaches where knowledge was not oriented towards manipulation. In his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971b) Habermas sets out the different 'interests' inherent in different kinds of knowledge.

the fact that much of what we assume to be pre-modern also constitutes our own lives and is thus a challenge to the naiveties of social evolutionism, not an advocacy of it.

Even if we say that the modern/pre-modern conceptual division was part of the historical horizon of late nineteenth century thought, different authors dealt with it differently.[3] It may be present in Marx and Weber in some degree, but neither of them simply aggrandised the world as it was then. Neither Weber nor Marx simply affirmed the virtues of modern forms of reason or of capitalism; they were critical of them. Weber's account of the growth of Western reason in the form of purposive, instrumental rationality (*Zwekrationalitat*) was not a simple endorsement of it. When he describes the West's form of rationality as the most 'formally rational', that is, as oriented towards finding the most effective means of achieving a given end, in contrast to the substantive, traditional kinds found elsewhere, he scrupulously adheres to his own call for value neutrality. There is no celebration of the West having arrived happily at reason *per se*, in fact more striking is his pessimism that Western reason is an 'iron cage' or 'steel hard shell'[4] in which the rational becomes irrational. Most famously, when he does let his 'value-free' guard down he proffers an ominous warning about where Western reason might lead:

> No one any longer knows who will live in this steel-hard casing [iron cage] and whether entirely new prophets or a might rebirth of ancient ideas and ideals will stand at the end of this prodigious development. Or … whether a mechanised ossification, embellished with a sort of rigidly compelled sense of self-importance will arise. Then, indeed, if ossification appears the saying might be true for the last "humans" … [that they are] … narrow specialists without mind, pleasure seekers without heart; in its conceit this nothingness imagines it has climbed to a level of humanity never before attained. (Weber 2002: 124)

[3] Collins notes that this division when expressed as the 'imperial gaze' is much more prominent in non-classic authors such as Charles Letourneau and Henry Hughes.

[4] Recent translations of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* break with Parsons' translation of 'stalhartes Gehäuse' as 'iron cage' replacing it with 'hard shell' or 'steel hard shell'. These latter terms suggest that while modern reason is reified it is also a heritage that is passed on and thus capable of change. See Chalcroft (1994) and Baehr (2002: 184–204).

Certainly classic texts do not come into the world 'innocently' but this tells us nothing about their wider validity or the authority they exert by shedding light on our contemporary world. Indeed, the universality of Western reason is as problematic today as it was in Weber's time, if not more so. Similarly, the voracious nature of capitalism and its tendency to crisis is as present today as it was in Marx's time, if not more so. Alexander (1987: 30) makes clear that the same idea applies in relation to Simmel and modern urban living. Contemporary sociologists may be familiar with a list of the ideal-typical qualities of urban life, 'but few will be able to understand or represent anonymity and it implications with the richness or vivacity of Simmel himself'. Summarising this idea and its relation to classic sociological texts, Dawe (1979: 366) argues that it does not matter at all whether it is Marx writing in the middle of the nineteenth century or authors writing in our time now, 'as long as they continue to speak to *our* experience of *our* lives and times, they live on'. The classic he avers has meaning and justification if, and only if, it is 'an articulation of the history we live and make now', not if we treat it as a museum piece torn from its experiential roots.

In largely ignoring the substantive contents of these authors' works, Connell bypasses the nature of classicity and fuses it with canonicity. Although the title of the article is 'Why is classical Theory Classical?' it is not concerned with what makes their work classic, but with how it got into the canon. It is assumed that to be in the canon makes a work classic by definition, and thus the concern is with the historical mechanics of how canonisation has taken place. There is an important analytical distinction to be made between a classic and a canon, which I shall focus on in this chapter. The problem being that if it is elided it produces confusion as to what is being affirmed or criticised.

The confusion is not all with those who would discredit the canon. In Chap. 2 it was pointed out that some authors affirmed the classic, seeing it and the canon as a singular unassailable virtue. In fact two positions were noted: an externalist position *and* an internalist position. The externalist view associated with Bourdieu, Connell (above), and Parker was hostile to the classical canon on the grounds that it was, like any other social artefact, the outcome of external ideological conditions and thus reproduced what should be challenged. These critics argued that to

place canonical texts above and beyond their context encourages a misguided reverence towards them akin to the reverential attitude readers of a religious canon have towards it. However, while the internalist view, associated with Poggi, Bloom, and Steiner is intent on defending the unassailable internal virtues of the classic, and appears to be in line with the argument I have derived from Gadamer, this is not so. Both views make no distinction between the classic and the wider canon of which it is a part. Indeed Bloom's famous contribution to the debate in which he dealt with the contribution of twenty-six classic authors is called *The Western Canon*.

The Importance of Distinction: Structure and Agency

In order to clarify matters it is relevant to draw the issue towards the structure-agency debate in sociology as the differences between the classic and canon in many ways express the analytical distinction frequently made, though often elided, between two separate social domains, that of 'agency' and that of 'structure'. The differences drawn between the classic and the canon, I believe, relate to those drawn between structure and agency by Archer (1988, 1995, 2000) and Layder (1981, 1987, 1997, 2006: part 4) in developing a critical-realist sociology. They emphasise the irreducibly distinct and separately real nature of these domains, arguing that we can only understand the relation between them by holding on to the distinction. Failure to do this invariably leads to explanatory conflation and confusion in favour of one side or the other.

Archer (2000: 4–13) argues that conflationists fail to recognise the stratified nature of social reality by losing track of the separate properties and powers of different strata. If we follow her and divide social reality into two broad strata[5] 'the parts' (institutions, structures, system, and sub-system integration) and 'the people' (actors, agents, groups, social integration), we can see how in her terms conflation can go upwards or downwards. Placing 'structure' spatially above 'agency', she states that

[5] As indicated here in brackets these broad strata are subdivided into further sub-strata.

explanations which downwardly conflate fail because they make the parts 'silence' the people, engulf the relations between them, and shape what people do think and say. They reduce the people to being an epiphenomenon of the wider structural system. Upwards conflation does the opposite. These explanations fail because the people are made (theoretically) to orchestrate the parts of society; social integration is seen to mould system integration, and actors appear able to make and remake structures at will. Explanations that upwardly conflate reduce the structural system to being an epiphenomenon of people's choices. In either case the causal powers of agents or structures are lost from view. Anti-reductionist critiques of this kind are a long-standing feature of sociological discussion, but noticeably Archer does not use the more usual term: 'reductionism'. This is because the issue goes beyond the problem of reducing one part of the equation for the sake of the other. She uses the term conflation or elision to capture the omission of the properties and powers of both structures *and* agents even in outlooks that purport to be anti-reductionist, such as Giddens' structuration theory (Archer 1995: Chap. 4). This kind of Giddensian approach where structure and agency are seen to be opposite sides of the same coin does not make an epiphenomenon of one side or the other, but still has the effect of eliding the distinctiveness of each through 'central conflation'. When Giddens describes structure and agency as mutually constitutive, central conflation happens, as it were, in the middle, where the parts and the people are fused together, and the specific efficacy of each is lost. Because structure and agency appear inseparable the relative independence of structure *from* agency and agency *from* structure disappears; they become one and the same.

Of course in any actual situation the two 'happen' together, but this does not undermine the conceptual need for sociological explanations to separate them out. Without such separation an invariant relation is seen to exist between the two, such that the sociologist cannot see how one affects the other because one *is* the other. For Giddens social structures have a virtual existence, becoming real only when they are 'instantiated' or enacted and thus can only exist in the present tense. The structurationist's commitment to the inseparability of agency and structure means there is no sense that structure could logically or chronologically precede or succeed agency, or exist in a variable rela-

tion to it. To illustrate this point (and using a personal example): a group of undergraduate students once asked me how this might work out in practice as they were more convinced by Giddens' idea that structures were only real when they were 'instantiated' by agents, than by Archer's view. I pointed out that they would not be sitting where they were next year as they would be graduating and leaving the university. Yet the educational structures they now inhabit would remain, there would be new students who would be taking the same course and they would inherit the same structure of degree, made up of the same courses and modules, and the same manner of it being taught: lectures, seminars, tutorials, and so on. The structure of higher education could not therefore be seen as dependent on being 'instantiated' by its agents, but as having a variable relation to them across time. Of course their (student) views on the course would be taken into account and some things might be slightly altered for next year by the academic staff. However, if there were to be significant changes they would most likely arise from the causal pressure exerted from structural/institutional forces in other sub-systems. The structural properties of the Polity and the Economy in particular impact on Education in explicit and implicit ways. The Polity's concern with employment rates for young people and the Economy's concern for the effectiveness of the workforce could mean that universities might (in part) restructure aspects of their work around the idea of 'embedding employability in the curriculum'.[6] Of course if this were to happen it would be mediated through the actions and interactions of staff and students across the sector, but it could not be explained properly as originating with them. Nor could it be said to originate with agents in the Polity or Economy as their political and economic decisions would already be shaped by the on-going structural pressures of those domains. Only by recognising that structures are independently real, though interrelated to the actions of agents, can we explain sociologically how different situations arise. The example was fairly rough and ready and went on for several more rounds in response to student questions, but its purpose was only to prise open what Archer calls the vice-like grip

[6] This is the title of a recent university document.

of central conflation so the effects of the power of both structures and agents can be fully appreciated.

Archer (1988: xiv–xv, 1988: 6) cites an essay by Lockwood (1964) as among the first where the explanatory importance of analytical dualism surfaced. By analytical dualism she means a conceptual separation of entities that can prove theoretically useful in sociological analysis, not a separation of entities as such. Lockwood argued for a separation to be recognised between 'system integration' and 'social integration', where system integration referred to the how the parts of a system related to each other and social integration to how well groups of actors were integrated into social life. For him the separation was part of a challenge to an assumption made in the Parsonsian systems theory of the time that if the parts of the system (the structures and institutions of the Polity, Economy, and Cultural System) were harmoniously integrated, then the people would necessarily also be integrated. Lockwood insisted that this was not necessarily the case; the relation between the two could vary and vary over time. One could have a society where there was a high level of congruence between the institutions of the system, but where social integration was low as shown by high levels of crime, murder, drug taking, and racial conflict. This evidence of low social integration, however, would be unlikely to affect the system which would find ways of containing it. Equally, one could have a society where system integration was low as evidenced by dissonance between its institutional parts, but unless there was a correspondingly high level of sectional group conflict, structural change would not ensue. Only when both factors coincided in time would there be a substantial societal change.

The purpose of this discussion has been to theorise the distinctiveness of, and *interplay* between, different strata of social reality, and to show that such strata can be at variance with each other at different times. The distinctiveness of two strata, structure and agency, is now to be drawn towards the issue of the canon and the classic and a parallel drawn between them. The aim is to show that a canon and its canonicity is not the same thing as, but separate from, a classic and its classicity.

A Canon Does Not a Classic Make

> The conviction that the canon survives only by virtue of institutional control and sponsorship has made it difficult to argue for the intrinsic merit and genuine worth of the works included in it. (Gorak 1991: 3)

In everyday conversation and often in academic writing the terms 'classic' and the 'canon' are used interchangeably to refer to the same thing. However, there are consequences for the *classicity* of the classic when they are run together, for without the distinction a conflation takes place akin to that between structure and agency with each subsuming the other in opposite directions. The virtues of the classic are rendered invisible when downward conflation takes place and it is subsumed under the idea of the canon, where the canon is seen as an ideological artefact expressing the structural interests of a particular group or class. In this it is often said to reinforce the ethnic and gendered assumptions of that group or class and exclude the work of those who fall outside it. On this (externalist) view the classic is levelled with and derived from the canon and its specious virtues, and is explainable in terms of those structural/institutional interests that buoy it up. Once the classic and the canon are fused together in favour of the latter and the latter is seen to be held in place through institutional controls, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to find any classicity in the classic. In these circumstances even what becomes a creatively successful aspect of an author's work can be explained away in terms of the empirical circumstances surrounding its conception. Durkheim's dedication to the concepts of social solidarity and moral regulation (and by implication his successful academic career) may be connected to the anxiety felt in France in the late nineteenth century over the need to make its national identity secure and stem the rising tide of social disorder.[7] It does though, tell us nothing about the

[7] Durkheim locates the origins of this anomie in the events of 1870: the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent revolutionary uprising of the Paris Commune. In literary theory this kind of reduction of creativity is more thoroughly developed. Tompkins (1985) and Brodhead (1986) locate the success of Nathaniel Hawthorne in the American literary canon in terms of his alliances with the nineteenth century New England intellectual aristocracy and his involvement with the Democratic Party machine of the time.

wider value of these concepts; indeed Durkheim was aware of the cultural milieu in which he was writing (see Lukes 1973: 396).

From the opposite direction we can see that the internalist view involves an upwards conflation where the role played by the canon is subsumed by the transcendent supra-historical virtues of the classic. This essentialist idea of classics makes the canon no more than a neutral space where they are held in collective high esteem. In these circumstances the classic runs into another kind of danger, that of becoming a museum piece, something to be regarded with reverence, but not productive of new insight. For all its advocacy of the classic this view splits it off from its own as well as our own historical horizons, which is the very thing that makes it classic: its classicity. Classicity, it was argued in the last chapter, presupposes embedment in historical tradition not transcendence of it. The classic's classicity was seen to be rooted in the idea that through tradition it can illuminate the significance of aspects of subsequent historical horizons.

Thus while classics and canons in many actual everyday situations appear fused together, as with agency and structure, they are not synonymous terms, but are analytically separable, speak of different things, and are explainable in different ways. Weinsheimer (1991: 129–132) finds the clue to their difference in the asymmetrical grammar surrounding the terms. A canon is a collective noun embracing a group of authors or works that have a common cultural status. There is no noun pointing to an individual canonical book, all we have is the adjective describing the book as canonical. The reverse is true of the classic, which is a singular noun denoting qualities attributable to a particular work or author. There is no collective noun for a group of classics; we can pluralise the noun 'classic' by adding an 's', but the word 'classics', still refers to individual texts. A similar contrast can be found in the verb to 'canonise'. We might, as some critics do, talk about Parsons 'canonising' his chosen founding fathers[8] for his own particular reasons, although this is clearly problematic as his hopes of synthesising the key ideas of the founders into a canon that would culminate in his own systems theory was destined to fail before the 1960s were out. But more importantly, while there is a verb to

[8] His chosen founders of sociology were Durkheim, Weber, Pareto, and Marshall.

'canonise' there is no verb to 'classicize'. No one can *make* a work classic; that has to come through the academic portals of discussion: analysis, debate, disagreement, dispute, dialogue, and so forth, culminating in a provisional consensus. It is a process that belongs on the side of agency, not a freewheeling agency, but one that presupposes the relevance of the fusion of historical horizons reigniting the significance of a particular text for a contemporary audience.

From this lack of symmetry we can say that the 'canon' is a collective term for a group of classics; it is a plural noun but it is a determinate entity. It can have many texts/authors in it, as the literary canon does or few as does the sociology canon. In being determinate we can say with some certainty what is 'in' the canon at any particular time. As an index of what is canonical we can examine the frequency with which an author or text appears on university curricula, on student book lists, or the frequency of citation in key academic journals, or the frequency of discussion in the discipline's basic textbooks. By the same token we can see that the canon excludes as well as includes texts and authors, though this does not mean it is necessarily exclusionary in an active sense. A religious canon such as the Christian Bible consists of sixty-seven books and specifically excludes the Apocrypha and several 'hidden' Gospels, but when critics point to the fact that all canons hold a fixed unchanging body of knowledge, the analogy breaks down. While an academic canon, in contrast to a religious canon is determinate, it is only relatively fixed. Outhwaite (2009) suggests that the canon in British sociology has expanded considerably in the past thirty years beyond the famous three; it now includes Bauman, Beck, Bourdieu, and Giddens. Habermas and Foucault could be added to the list, he says, but they sit less squarely as sociologists in a sociology canon (2009: 1039, no. 5).[9] The sociology canon, then, is not closed to newcomers nor in light of its membership is it ideologically homogenous.

If we can say the canon is determinate but plural; the classic by contrast is singular and indeterminate.[10] Its indeterminacy lies in the fact

[9] See also Baehr's (2002: 111ff) comments to this effect.

[10] Again, I owe this argument to Weinsheimer's valuable essay (1991: 131), though I have adjusted it to deal with the sociological nature of this argument.

that the classic is not a predictable thing; there is no template to follow to make a classic. Its classicity is acquired through the historical movement of tradition and presupposes an active judgement of worth. We can say Parsons, Coser, and Mills were influential in making certain authors canonical, but there is no equivalent process for the classic; they could not have 'classicised' their chosen works or authors. Classicity is a property acquired by the work, as Weinsheimer (1991: 131) puts it: 'both adjective and noun, classic is what a classic is'. Canonicity, on the other hand is not a quality of the work itself but what happens to a work in relation to the developing structure of an academic discipline. A canon is a collection of works through which a discipline (partly) organises its identity in relation to the changing demands of wider institutional structures and beyond.[11] It belongs on the side of structure and system because it is a component part of that wider educational and cultural system, not on the side of agency. When a work enters the canon nothing in it alters—it stays that same canonical work; the words on the page repeatedly identify it as the same thing. When a work becomes a classic it shows its classicity in regularly altering its meaning to illuminate new horizons; if it ceases to do that then its status as classic is in doubt.

Prising open a gap between canons and classics enables us to see that like structure and agency the two things are analytically distinct and discussion of their worth points towards different issues. It also enables us to see that they may not necessarily coincide in time. Even in the relatively short history of sociology it is possible to say that a work can be in the canon but not thought classic, and a work thought classic may not be in the canon.

It may be, for example, that for the sociologist who has absorbed Durkheim's ideas Marx's are anathema, but he or she would have to acknowledge Marx as part of the sociology canon, though not his work as classic. The same thing applies to Durkheim's work. It has been canonical in sociology for the past sixty years but in that time it has not always been thought classic. While acknowledging his work as part of sociology's canonical history many sociologists from the 1960s onwards have

[11] By 'beyond' I mean that the function of higher education itself can change and thus make some canonical works redundant or bring others into play.

demurred from believing it classic. It has regularly been dismissed as 'positivist', 'conservative', or more recently, 'patriarchal' (Gane 1983; Lehmann 1991; Marshall and Witz 2004). In the 1960s the emergence of interpretive sociology left Durkheim's work accused by Jack Douglas (1967, 1971: 4–9) and others of misdirecting sociology down a path into an intellectual cul-de-sac by ignoring the central importance of lived experience. In doing this, he argued, it stunted the proper growth of the sociology towards being a fully interpretive discipline. Yet while his work was increasingly not considered classic, it remained in the canon. It is only in more recent times that its classic qualities have re-emerged. It is difficult to be exact over the timing or significance of these things but Alexander's edited collection *Durkheimian sociology: cultural studies* (1988), was amongst the first to re-awaken a fresh potential in Durkheim's work. It brought the value of his account of ritual to the forefront of possible analyses, not only in Alexander's essay on 'Watergate', but also in Randall Collins' 'The Durkheimian tradition in conflict sociology'. In the former Alexander suggests that the 'Watergate' affair had a ritualistic quality which far from undermining America's moral solidarity ultimately had a unifying effect on it. In the latter, and in a similarly counterintuitive way, Collins abstracts 'ritual' from Durkheim's functionalism and concern for consensus, by placing it as a key component in the sociological analysis of conflict. This 'new Durkheim' theme is continued later in Tiryakian's essay 'Durkheim, solidarity and September 11' (in Alexander and Smith 2005). Here Tiryakian draws on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* to ask the question whether a concept like 'collective effervescence' has a regenerative application towards social solidarity in the modern world. In an analysis of the events of 9/11 he shows that it does. Far from demoralising the American people, the attacks galvanised them into a new solidarity with President George W. Bush becoming the 'collective representation' of 'American sentiments of national solidarity' (2005: 314–315). A sacralised language was used to narrate the events as a tragic story of mythic proportions for which violent retribution would need to be sought. These cultural factors provided the groundswell to mobilise national, indeed international support.

If Durkheim has been canonical without being classical and his work only in recent times evoking the 'classic' response, the opposite is true of

Georg Simmel. He never quite made it fully into the canon, though he is often referred to as a classic theorist.[12] Outhwaite (2009: 1029–1030) describes the traditional canon of three authors as the 'holy trinity' of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, but only 'sometimes including Simmel'. Craib (1997: 53) makes the same point that Simmel never quite seems to qualify as one of the founding thinkers of sociology of equal status to the other three. He has had his advocates, notably Levine who regards him, contrary to the usual judgement, as the most original and important of the classic authors (Levine 1971, 1981). Parsons' unwillingness to draw on Simmel's work except through occasional reference, and the lack of others willing to canonise him has left Simmel something of a noble outsider, but an outsider nevertheless.[13] He seems to have been aware that his work was of a kind that would not produce a singular, eponymous sociology and that his status as an outsider would follow him even after his death:

> I know that I shall die without intellectual heirs, and that is as it should be. My legacy, as it were, in cash, distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use conformed to *his* nature: a use which will reveal no longer its indebtedness to this heritage. (cited in Levine 1971: xii)

Although Parsons was familiar with his work and found some affinity with it, the reasons for his downplaying its worth remain something of an issue (Levine 1981, 1991). At one stage it seems there were personal reasons concerned with the fact that an academic competitor (Howard Becker) had already incorporated Simmel's position into his work and Parsons wanted his *Structure of Social Action* to be the first book to bring the key ideas of German sociology to the USA (Levine 1991: 1099). More academically he found Simmel's descriptive emphasis on social interaction incompatible with his more analytical approach and his aim

[12] A notable exception to this is to be found in Craib's *Classical Social Theory* (1997). In this he places Simmel firmly with the famous three as part of the canon, analysing each in terms of how they address four dualisms: individual/society; action structure; social integration/system integration; modernity/capitalism-socialism.

[13] This role as an outsider extended to his academic career, where anti-Semitism blocked his path. See Ritzer's (2000: 34–35) biographical sketch; also Frisby (1981).

of a grand synthesis which was to culminate in *The Social System* (1951). Later, he acknowledged in some degree his neglect of Simmel, but still did not regard him as a theorist on the same level as his other choices (Parsons 1968: XIV, note 10). In terms of methodological outlook Parsons was quite right; the fractured, impressionistic style of Simmel is very much at odds with Parsons' analytical wish to systematise and compartmentalise all aspects of social life. Simmel does not write in a systematic fashion, indeed in many ways his work is the opposite of systematic or methodical. But ironically this has also turned out to be the source of its classicity, even though it worked against him becoming canonical.

If we characterise the contemporary horizon as a postmodern one of fast, fragmentary, and fleeting experience, then it is unsurprising to find Simmel's accounts of life in the late nineteenth century speak anew to us in the present. His work is pitched at a micro-sociological level bringing into the foreground the nuances of social life: courtesy, coyness, fashion, loneliness, alienation, things that capture the transitory nature of much experience today. He also captured the ambivalence of many intimate experiences, for example, the way the need to succeed at all costs in the modern world leads to *Schadenfreude*: 'there is more than a little satisfaction in the misfortune of a friend' (Simmel 1971: 93). In primarily essay form he wrote unstructured vignettes that do not invite statistical back-up but rely on a reader's intuitive sense of their truth.[14] His impressionistic style of writing captures the ephemeral phenomena with which contemporary social life is laced and is regarded as the herald of postmodernism (Bergey 2004; Frisby 1981, 1984, 1992; Stauth and Turner 1988: 17; Weinstein and Weinstein 1993). In his writing style and in his concern for the mundane, parallels might be drawn between him and Baudrillard, though nearly a hundred years separates their work.

The purpose of drawing attention to Durkheim and Simmel in this way is to show that it is possible for an author to be canonical but not classic, or classic but not canonical. Once 'canon' and 'classic' have been analytically separated and their different properties and powers recognised, we can see that their respective authors and works may not coincide because, as with

[14] The exception is *The Philosophy of Money* (1990), first published in 1900. He was also one of the few classic authors who wrote sympathetically on feminist issues; see Simmel (1984).

structure and agency, they are part of logically and chronologically distinct arenas even though in actual situations they are intertwined. We can see that the rationale for a canon is different from the rationale for a classic and that our judgement of each should be informed by these differences.

The works in a canon are given the common authority to represent what a discipline believes about itself. It is formed to meet the needs of that discipline as it defines itself in a particular way at a particular time. In light of this it is unsurprising that after the trauma of the Second World War, increasing levels of economic affluence and optimism in the USA led to an expansion of higher education and a perceived need felt by key figures to lay down foundations on which a unified sociology could stand and expand. The sociology canon, as Connell has rightly argued, is the outcome of an academic-political process designed to shape the kind of syllabi, courses, and substantive topics institutions offer and which influences its research programmes. It defines the concepts and ideas that are the currency of a discipline and in this may express the interests of a class or a group. As a political process it may also involve the internal politics of educational institutions and the establishment of personal reputations within them, as noted above. When critics describe a canon as something 'other people once powerful have made' (von Hallberg 1984: 1), they are right. But given the nature of a canon as something explainable in terms of the establishment and survival of an academic discipline within the changing political and cultural structures of education, and that those structures are explainable in terms of the effects of the shifting needs of the wider social system, this should not be seen in a negative light. Every academic discipline needs to sustain itself and develop on the foundations of a relatively stable curriculum, whatever form that may take. We may not like the idea of a canon as part of that curriculum, but putting it bluntly, that's the way it is. Moreover, the preferences of Parsons et al. have never gone uncontested nor have they silenced alternative voices. The concepts he and others used have not precluded many others emerging.[15] If Outhwaite (2009) is right then the canon has opened its doors to a variety of new authors no less heterogeneous in outlook that the founding three.

[15] In his *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991: 242–244) Giddens has forty concepts that would be unrecognisable to Parsons et al.

Whether newly canonised authors and texts should be thought classic is a different matter. In contrast to the canonical text, the nature of the classic lies in its 'classicity'. This is a property of the text in relation to the horizons of historical tradition. It is something that accrues to it through its capacity to disclose how much the present has in common with the past and the past with the present. In Simmel we see the past and the present connected through what we now call postmodernism. We can see now that postmodern experiences were present in an incipient way more than a hundred years ago, long before Baudrillard foregrounded them in the 1980s. We can see a two way process at work in this. The experience of our contemporary horizon brings to light elements that underpin Simmel's texts that might have remained obscure without them. His focus on the ephemeral and ambivalent nature of interaction could have continued to be seen as an arbitrary, subjective choice, had its relevance not been made concrete by the arrival of postmodernism. On the other hand his work now broadens the perspective through which we regard the present. It sensitises us to the fact that the past is less far away than we might think. In bringing 'perspective' it challenges what is sometimes the myopia of contemporary sociology immersed as it is in the immediacy of the present. In this the classic enlarges our sense of the contemporary world.

In discussions of canons and classics it is canons that tend to receive the most trenchant criticism. Classic texts and their authors can be forgiven for expressing the assumptions of their time and place, and while these need to be exposed and challenged, it is the canon they inhabit that allows them to be passed on passively and uncritiqued to the next generation. The next section looks more closely at the idea of a canon to establish whether this dismal reputation is justified or indeed whether there is such a thing as a canon.

The Idea of a Canon

In some respects academic canons are recent discoveries. The literary canon is more extensive than the sociology one and has a longer history. Yet Gorak (1991: 5) observes that a key reference text for graduate students of literature, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which

trebled in size between 1964 and 1975 made no reference to a 'canon' at either point. And the standard reference source Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms* makes no mention of the literary canon as late as 1981. In sociology, while there are plenty of earlier references to 'classics', the discovery of a 'canon' came later in the 1990s and early 2000s with Connell (1997), Parker (1997), Reed (2006), Outhwaite (2009), and Carriera da Silva (2011).[16]

Again, on a personal note, certainly when I was an undergraduate in the mid-1970s I was unaware that there was a group of authors who had canonical status. Indeed I am not sure at the time that I knew what a canon was. A local vicar I knew slightly was called a canon because of a connection he had with a cathedral forty miles away, but beyond that the word was opaque to me at best. At university Weber, Marx, and Durkheim were certainly a part of the curriculum with Simmel, Schutz, and Mead jockeying alongside; others such as Tönnies, Veblen, and Mannheim were given brief airings on various occasions. Tutors might give priority to the ideas of one author over another because of their perceived value, but there was no sense that the famous three represented a canon. There was no sense that any of them were canonical and had produced edicts we students had to imbibe. Their ideas were presented as significant but invariably contestable. One assignment I remember involved critically comparing Marx's account of alienation in the *1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* with Simmel's, in his essay 'Metropolis and Mental Life'. I do not recall the outcome of the assignment but I found it illuminating to assess alienation as something historically contingent (Marx) and contrasting it to being a metaphysically tragic feature of modern life in general (Simmel). There was no steer from the tutor to choose Marx's ideas over Simmel's as those of a canonical over a non-canonical author. The only directive was to make sure both views were properly expressed in an appropriate register and given their due. While

[16] There is an earlier unpublished reference to the canon—see Baehr (2002: 155), which refers to Jon Gubbay and Howard Caygill's work on the role of the canon in the teaching of sociology in the UK. In the introduction to his edited book, *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics*, Camic (1997: 2) refers to the canon in passing, noting that the processes of canonisation 'are still little understood'. The essays focus on the still valuable qualities of classic authors; the one exception is by McDonald who writes to enlarge the canon to include more women authors.

personal examples are only of limited value the purpose of this one is to draw attention to the fluid nature of academic canons, if canons they are.

Guillory (1994: 6) observes that the word canon has only recently come into common (literary) usage, displacing the 'expressly honorific term "classic" precisely in order to isolate the "classics" as objects of critique'. Once isolated like this the concept of a canon becomes guilty by association with the closed enclaves of a religious canon. The inherent logic of closure which supposedly characterises a canon flies in the face of the sceptical outlook towards authority in general that has characterised thought in the social sciences and the humanities since the 1960s. The automatic nature of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' naturally assumes an antagonistic attitude towards a canon which comes to be seen as a political vehicle for transferring unquestioned the assumptions embodied in its canonical texts. As a sociologist Austin Harrington (2004: 40) has no qualms about dismissing a literary or art canon and presumably a sociology canon too, as being both religious and exclusionary:

> …the idea of a canon in literary or art history carries the connotation of a sacred sequence, based on a succession of 'founding fathers', a holy parade of the saints of art through history. It is an exclusionary, patriarchal construction of thought.

Of course in our secular-minded culture associating academic texts with texts that claim to be divinely inspired is likely to produce mirth but little else. However, dismissing an academic canon because of this mooted association is unhelpful and inaccurate.

Academic Canons Are Not Religious Canons

The analogy between the academic and the religious canon breaks down for several reasons.[17] Firstly there is a tacit but mistaken assumption that like the religious canon the academic canon is subject to closure. Once the

[17] This discussion owes much to the insights and information provided by Baehr (2002: 163–172); Gorak (1991: 1–8, 19–31, 35–43); Kermode (1987).

charismatic sources (the texts) of religious belief are established there is in theory no room for further additions. Because they are considered divine revelations they cannot be de-revealed, nor added to. Thus the canon is set and these texts and only these texts are sufficient to sustain the central belief. As a canon they are complete, a totality to which new additions would pose a threat. Both Christianity and Judaism, for example, have viewed the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls with as much trepidation as hope as they are as likely to disrupt as confirm our understanding of the origins and identity of these faiths (Sanders 2001: 175–176). Consisting of some 850 manuscripts many of which are fragments, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the Judean desert between 1947 and 1956. About 200 are considered 'biblical' because they are concerned with matters of prophecy familiar to Christians through the Old Testament. Although establishing authorship has proved difficult there is no doubt about the authenticity of the documents and carbon dating has placed them as being written between 150 BC and 68 AD. While there does not appear to be anything that is in direct conflict with Christian or Judaic beliefs, there has been a suspicion that the slowness of their appearance in the public sphere is part of a conspiracy to avoid any risk of undermining the tenets of their respective established canons.

While religious canons do not remain exactly the same indefinitely, they are by virtue of their once-only inspirational origins, closed to new texts and authors in a way that is not characteristic of academic canons. Although Parker and Reed call for an opening up of the sociology canon (Connell wants it eliminated altogether) as if it were closed, they are in effect pushing on an open door. No one expects the sociology canon to remain unchanged as the very dynamic of post-Enlightenment disciplinary traditions depend on contestation and transformation for their continuation.

A second reason for challenging the equivalence of these canons is that the organisational formality underlying religious canons is not present in the formation of academic canons. In terms of religious canons, we can pinpoint what has been canonised, and with some accuracy, when that canonisation took place. In terms of the Jewish canon, we can say that around 90 BC, the Council of Jamnia codified a heterogeneous set of texts, known separately as the *Law*, the *Prophets,* and the *Writings*,

and that henceforth these would be known collectively as a canon, and would be sacred and binding for Jewish people. By the latter stages of the fourth century AD, the need to define and close the Christian canon had also become apparent, with Athanasius in 367 AD first using the word 'canon' in a religious context to list the books that were 'in' and reject as apocryphal those that were 'out'. By 400 AD, a Christian canon had been fixed such that Amphilochius, the Bishop of Iconius could declare his catalogue of Old and New Testament books to be 'perhaps the most reliable canon of divinely inspired Scriptures' (Gorak 1991: 19; see Gorak 1991: 19–31; Kermode 1987: 600–609). With regard to the process of canonising saints in the Roman Catholic Church, we can as Baehr (2002: 166) notes, examine the deliberations of the Vatican's Congregation of the Causes of Saints as the body that oversees this process and establish with some certainty what, why, and when something has been decided. However, one cannot proceed in this way with academic canons. When Connell (1997: 1537) declares that there was a 'severe deficit of legitimacy' in sociology after the Second World War, and that the sociological canon was created by Parsons et al., to fill the gap left by the failure of pre-war empiricism, we are talking in a quite different register. There was no declaration by Parsons et al. that a canon had been created, no group of people who met to define the limits of the canon, no ties that bound the discipline to Parsons' preferences,[18] and as noted by Collins (1997: 156), no evidence that there was actually a deficit of legitimacy.

The contents of an academic canon are not the outcome of formal deliberation over what should be canonised, nor are they something imposed by fiat; they establish themselves over time through a process of reflection and argumentation about their relative virtues. In this, they are, *a priori*, different from texts in a religious canon for a third reason. Texts in an academic canon are subject to critique, those in a religious canon are epistemologically distinct; they may be open to interpretation but in another sense they are above critical suspicion (Baehr 2002: 167). What is striking about texts in the Christian canon, Kermode (1987: 605) declares, is that

[18] Parsons choice of canonical authors was for Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto. Pareto has remained outside the canon, while Marx, in spite of Parsons, has duly entered it.

> Regardless of innumerable historical vicissitudes, redactions, interpolations, and corruptions, the canonical text is held to be eternally fixed, unalterable, and of such immeasurable interpretative potential that it remains, despite its unaltered state, sufficient for all future times.

Indeed, not only are these key religious texts unalterable and sufficient for all time, they are in a sense parts of the same text, one book focused on the life of Christ around whose example Christians are expected to build their lives. Adopting a contemporary analytical outlook, we may be able to find discrepancies in the different accounts of Christ's life given in the Gospels, but this does not invalidate them in terms of their canonical place defining the overall Christian message.[19] So homogeneous are the texts of the religious canon that even if other texts come along that say the same thing they cannot be regarded in the same light. Gorak (1991: 35–36) brings this distinction into focus by citing Thomas Aquinas' comparison of the biblical Paul's views on spirituality and virtue with those of Aristotle. Aquinas finds common ground between the two and accepts that Paul's views confirm Aristotle's, but that this does not work the other way round. In no sense could Aristotle's views be said to confirm Paul's as the biblical basis of the latter's views makes them incontrovertible. The priority accorded the scriptures of the Christian canon means that the texts these authors produced belong in a distinct knowledge category of their own. In contrast, texts in an academic canon are not focused on one thing. In sociology the canonical authors are a heterogeneous group whose ideas in many ways are at odds with each other. Though there are sociologists who may call themselves Durkheimian or Marxist or Weberian, there are none, as Wallerstein (1999: 4–9) remarks, who would accept for themselves the label 'Durkheimian-Marxist-Weberian'. The ideas of these authors are too disparate to be part of a canon that presents a unified account of the discipline. Yet

[19] Kermode (1987: 606–609) makes the point that since the advent of modern 'scientific philology' in the eighteenth century the Christian canon has been subject to a different kind of scrutiny. The modern emphasis on historical origins means that interpreting the bible has become less a matter of theology more one of philological archaeology. The Bible is not now thought of less as one inspired whole, but more a fairly random set of historical texts. However, this change in mind-set has not led to the dissolution of the Christian canon.

why does this diverse group persist in the sociological imagination? For Wallerstein the answer lies in the fact that each provided a fundamental axiom necessary for the perception of social reality as an on-going process. From Durkheim it was commonly accepted social facts existing *sui generis* as the necessary presupposition for a level of social consensus; from Marx it was the perennial nature of (class) conflict and thus the inherence of dissensus; from Weber it was the existence of mechanisms of 'legitimacy' to contain conflict. While this, as Wallerstein acknowledges, is a reduction of the sophistication of these authors' works, it is a quite recognisable gloss. What makes it striking is that unlike the texts of a religious canon that speak of the same thing, these authors are canonical *because* of their divergence. They do not speak of the same thing; indeed the sociologies that bear their names have a history of marked disagreement.[20]

Despite the limits of the description it does express three intuitions, which as Wallerstein remarks, 'add up to a coherent minimum baseline for the study of social reality' (1999: 4). Certainly, sociologists of all stripes are familiar with this canonical baseline and intuitively recognise its sociologically disclosive qualities. In an important sense these baseline presuppositions are not obstacles to be overcome as critics of the canon might have it, but the conditions through which we have sociological understanding at all. It would be difficult to conceive of things 'sociologically' without them. Whatever the historical context of their origins, subtract these baseline presuppositions from the discipline and it is difficult to see that one has sociology at all.

While texts in a religious canon are ultimately incontrovertible, texts in an academic canon emerge from the critical interaction between different interlocutors over the perceived merits of the text. This 'interlocution' does not take place in a vacuum, it is subject to the structural influences of a particular context, but the process is one of rational evaluation, not reverential acceptance. The existence of our academic canons has not restricted the questions we can ask of them, indeed, the many volumes of critique pitched against canons in the last thirty years seem to

[20] In fact in part two of this address Wallerstein raises six sociological challenges to the baseline axioms of the famous three.

be living proof that the mooted ideology of their transmission is not passively absorbed. It may be that we need to conceive of the transmission of tradition in a different way. Instead of seeing it as the straightforward reproduction of customs and outlooks from the past, as the transposition of the past directly into the present, we need rather to recognise that the assimilation of the past happens according to contemporary concerns, and that the process of reception is necessarily interpretive (Davey 2006: 50).

If we consider the importance of this hermeneutic dimension a little further, it is apparent that even the Christian canon is not as fixed an entity it appears to be. The names of books may not have changed, but what they mean has. For example, their translation from Latin into English, first by John Wycliffe in the 1380s and later from Greek and Hebrew by William Tyndale in the mid-1520s, made the 'word of God' directly available to ordinary English speakers. No longer was the Christian message the private possession of the Roman Catholic Church because of having been written only in the language of the educated. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular, not only of English, but of several European languages, changed the nature of the Christian canon in the sense that the message it embodied opened up the possibility of a different but no less spiritual path, one that did not involve the intercession of the Catholic Church hierarchy. In short, it laid the foundation for that different understanding of Christianity we now know as Protestantism. The point I make is that not only are classics subject to change through interpretation, but so also in some measure are canons, including religious canons.

I have introduced the distinctions between religious and academic canons to highlight their differences and have done this to challenge the misleading idea that academic canons are *closed* in the same way as religious canons are. Academic canons are not 'given' reified objects, which exist indefinitely, an assumption held in different ways by both their radical critics and conservative advocates. Moreover, when considered more hermeneutically even religious canons are not as closed as they first seem.

The Canon Reconsidered

The aim of the previous section has been to place the idea of a canon, particularly an academic canon, in a more positive light by showing that it is fluid and open to change. However showing that a canon is changeable still leaves the familiar impression that it is essentially restrictive rather than enabling—just less restrictive than previously thought. In this last section I want to argue that even canons have inherent virtues and like 'structures' more widely, they have properties that facilitate matters as well as limiting them.

Much of the criticism levelled at the idea of a canon is that it is 'political' in a negative way. Homologies are drawn between the process by which a canon and its exclusions happen and the process by which certain social groups are excluded from power and political representation. While it was noted in Chap. 2 that this homology is misleading one should recognise that there is a political dimension to canons in that their contents have a certain kind of authority that commands regular attention, regular re-reading. However as we have seen in previous discussion the authority of tradition and the nature of habit are not merely matters of mechanical repetition but have a productive, creative aspect that generates new insight. Even Talcott Parsons, whose hope of creating a science of society would seem to make the idea of canonical works anathema, regarded re-reading Durkheim and Weber at a later date as having produced a new level of understanding:

> If the works in question really belong to the category of great human intellectual achievements … you can never exhaust their meaning and significance for your work in a single reading. If you go back to them you *always* find something new you did not understand before. Their texture is incredibly rich. (Talcott Parsons 1981: 189, original emphasis)

The word 'canon' has a variety of meanings. I have used it to refer to a particular set of 'inspired' religious texts, and to a group of academic books or their authors, though also in passing to a priest or vicar who had a connection to a cathedral. In fact the current *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* lists nine different meanings for the term, some religious some

secular. This range of meaning reflects the extensive reach of the word. Etymologically, it has its origins in the Greek word *kanon*, meaning a cane, reed, or rod. Its early meanings referred variously to the canes used for stiffening shields; rods used in weaving; the beams used for scales; the keys and stops in flutes, and plumb lines used by carpenters and masons (Gorak 1991: 9–10). The common property of these *kanons* is their straightness, and this in embryonic form is what opens up into the modern meaning of 'canon' as an abstract measure of something important. It is the kind of thing we might now colloquially call a gold standard, a yardstick, or benchmark of something valuable. We can see a shift of meaning from the earlier physical-practical notion of measurement to a later abstract concept of evaluating things, with each implying the other.

Of course a critic might well say that this 'straightness' suggests something rigid and unbending, with the implication that the purpose of a canon is to control people by binding them to an unalterable standard and for this reason canons should be discarded because they are oppressive. Yet this judgement conceals the fact that ancient Greek *kanons* equally share enabling properties. Those straight rods and canes enabled cloth to be woven; accurate scales enabled material to be weighed consistently; the stops on flutes enabled music to be taught and played; plumb lines used by masons and carpenters meant that sculptures and buildings could be made according to a plan. These *kanons* opened up possibilities and like normative structures generally we misjudge them if we see only constraint in them.

Nor should we think that the *kanons* of Greek antiquity were themselves not criticised at the time any more than modern canons are now. Gorak (1991: 10ff) cites examples where slavishly following the rules of the *kanon* is criticised because it produces exactly the opposite effect from the one desired. For instance, Aristophanes and Plato both attack the Sophists for measuring the worth of their sentences less by the sense they contain than by their length of *kanones* (claims/statements). Some early musicologists were regarded unfavourably because composing music according to strict mathematical laws or *kanones* meant their compositions lacked musicality. Equally though, Plato's Socrates regrets the fact that moral philosophy lacks the straight lines of measurement available to carpenters and masons. Unable to achieve the kind of precision avail-

able to those who use mathematical instruments to measure the world, Socrates develops another more appropriate *kanon*: dialectic. This alternative *kanon* is based on an on-going process of question and answer, the to-and-fro of which opens up the distinctive nature of the moral realm and enables its practitioners to foster questions that challenge the easy moral certainties of public life. In both these areas, the mason's rule and the philosopher's dialectic, there is a belief that *kanons* are worth teaching because they facilitate creativity.

Although the function of a canon is to bring shape and purpose to an activity, clearly, its evolution does not equate straightforwardly with a stable consensus. As Gorak (1991: 4) states, as soon as the idea of a canon moved away from solely matters of measurement, 'the range of meanings ascribed to it widens and becomes highly controversial'. What is apparent is that canons are not simply hegemonic entities; they work both centripetally and centrifugally. They bind people to a core of presuppositions, but simultaneously allow their ideas to spin-off creatively through the way those presuppositions engage and re-engage with reality.

What is also apparent is that canons are intellectually, historically, and geographically more widespread than usually thought. They seem to be a universal feature of life in all societies where knowledge is valued. The classical scholar George Kennedy (2001: 105ff) points out that canons are not peculiar to Greece and the traditions of the Western world. In the ancient world the scribes of Mesopotamia canonised the *Gilgamesh*, Confucian scholars in China canonised the *The Book of Odes*, in India the Brahmins canonised *The Vedas, The Upanishads,* and *The Mahabharata*, and so forth. In the modern world there are not only canons of sociology and English Literature, but of African literature, German literature, music, art, philosophy, film.

Kennedy (1990: 223) argues that the desire for a canon reflects a need for a kind of self-preservation, an assertion of control over chaos and a marking out of one's own territory. This conception I think is too narrow and needs widening as it relies on the negative view that canons exist primarily as a limit, a form of defence against intruders. Nevertheless, it may be that even in this regard canons serve academic disciplines better than critics suggest. They may in fact work as political bastions for conserving 'difficulty' in the same way that I argued was the case with tradition. This

'difficulty', are the ideas which jar with familiar assumptions and that society would otherwise obstruct, but still hold our attention. It is hard to see how, for example, Marx's work, critical as it is of the workings of capitalist society, would have lasted in the voracious world of modern capitalism without academic incorporation into the sociological canon. One might also argue that it was the authority of the literary canon that enabled such works as *Mme. Bovary, Ulysses, Lady Chatterley's Lover,* and *Lolita*, to survive against those who would have them banned. The 'difficulty' these texts represented was conserved through the authority of their respective canons.

Certainly, with Kennedy I want to argue that canons are not exceptional, but a necessary feature of intellectual life and are in effect a way of organising what would otherwise be large swathes of inchoate material. However, canons are not only this; they are also a way of giving form to, and passing on, things that have been found valuable. In this, they are a natural outcome of the human propensity to evaluate things. Canons conserve at an institutional level certain ways of inhabiting the world, certain ways of looking at things 'sociologically', for instance. They are not closed, but bodies of ideas that open up important thought-possibilities, what might be called 'thought-*kanones*' for subsequent generations. They should not be discarded as though they were an intellectual museum for storing collections of books once thought great by an earlier generation, but as the tacitly accumulated wisdom that defines a discipline's identity.

A Very Short Overall Summary

At the end of a story it is tempting to write a grand finale summing up everything, putting everything in its place and arriving at an exact conclusion. Perhaps it is a hermeneutic turn of thought that resists the idea of finality as a closing down of further thought. Instead I will briefly summarise the overall case that has been brought. Anyone who has waded through the thickets of theory in these chapters will know that I have sought ways of validating the idea of a classic and in the final stages what I hope are good reasons for retaining the idea of a canon. The route taken has been a winding one that has involved cutting back the

undergrowth around many conceptual assumptions that have grown up in and around sociology and its classics. The question of the discipline's identity, its subtle occlusion of the past, and its absorption in the present, its adoption of a postmodernist outlook and the resultant idea of a reader-less, referent-less, and author-less text, have been challenged to allow the significance of the classic to become apparent. In the process less familiar concepts, such as tradition and habit, were brought to the fore as a way of underscoring the link of sociology to hermeneutics. The debate between Gadamer and Habermas was used as a vehicle to explore the wider relevance of hermeneutics to sociology and to disclose how the movement of historical horizons generates the classicity of a classic. A number of examples were drawn from sociology to illustrate the case. Drawing a distinction between the classic and the canon based on an a parallel distinction between structure and agency allows us to see that classics and canons are not the same thing and thus should be subject to different kinds of critical appreciation. Though the canon has generally received more criticism than the classic, the case finished with a defence of the canon as something that was open rather than closed, and has more structural-political value than is often assumed.

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