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# Producing Textbook Sociology

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A N D N A T H A N W R I G H T

## *Producing Textbook Sociology\**

### **Abstract**

The conservative role of the textbook in reproducing the dominant ideas of a disciplinary field is well known. The factors driving that content have remained almost entirely unexamined. Reviewing the universe of textbooks aimed at the American market between 1998 and 2004, we explore the persistence of the identification in American sociology textbooks of a paradigm in which structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism are used to frame the theoretical core of the discipline. We examine how over time the textbook market produces both supply and demand pressures to reproduce content that is at odds with the mainstream of the profession. We draw upon in-depth interviews with recent textbook authors and their editors.

*Keywords:* Introductory Sociology, Sociological Theory, Sociological Pedagogy.

PHILOSOPHERS OF SCIENCE have long noted the conservative role of the textbook in reproducing the dominant ideas of a disciplinary field (*e.g.* Kuhn 1979). In the mid-1930s, Ludwig Fleck (1979, pp. 111ff.) distinguished state-of-the-art “journal science” written for “specific” experts, from handbook (*vademecum*) science (which translates journal science for “general” experts), popular science (for non-experts), and textbook science (which introduces initiates to the expert system). Fleck argued that each component of the circle produces its own type of knowledge, or model, of the discipline. Handbook science selectively systematizes the larger world of journal science, while textbook science is one step further removed. In his path-breaking and oft-cited work, Kuhn (1996 [1963], 1979) argues that

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textbook modes of presentation produce stable and formulaic presentations of the dominant paradigm within a field. Because textbooks cannot meaningfully engage state-of-the-art debates at the core of the field, they are inevitably, and perhaps irredeemably, misleading from the standpoint of journal science (see also Brooke 1998).

The Fleck/Kuhn model of the textbook has withstood the test of time. Research scientists in virtually all fields would accept its descriptive accuracy. But the contexts in which textbooks are produced, and the specific *mechanisms* that reinforce retrograde textbook content, have remained largely unexplored (Michael 1998, Platt 2008a). In particular, textbooks are unique scholarly products aimed at large and growing markets as systems of higher education expand around the world. A best-selling textbook can generate hundreds of thousands, and in a few select cases, millions of dollars of revenue each year. They are not only written by authors, but also *produced* by organizational and market processes unlike those found anywhere else in the universe of scholarship and higher education.

When sociology textbooks have been examined, it has been almost entirely through analyses of their content.<sup>1</sup> Content analysis has been used to document textbook shortcomings (e.g. how a particular topic is [mis]treated in textbooks), or to use textbooks as a source of data to identify the “conventional wisdom” or “lowest common denominator” of the discipline (e.g. Ferree and Hall 1996, Lynch and Bogan 1997). But the description of content does not explain it. In spite of disciplinary research tools capable of turning our texts into objects of analysis, the distinctive content of the textbook remains almost completely unexamined. We lack, in short, a sociology of our own textbooks.

Our focus in this paper is on the production of the comprehensive introductory sociology textbooks targeted at beginning students in the United States. Out of a universe of nearly 10 million college students, some 800,000 sociology textbooks are sold each year to beginning sociology students (Editor Interviews; Hamilton and Form 2003), and the vast majority of introductory sociology instructors utilize one of the available textbooks (McGee 1985, pp. 176-77, Form and Hamilton

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the case of American introductory textbooks, we have found about three dozen papers over the past 25 years analyzing (and in virtually every case criticizing) the *content* of sociology textbooks, usually in relation to the treatment of a specific topic or theory. A very recent example, providing mostly descriptive overviews of

sociology textbook content in diverse national contexts such as Britain, Norway, France, Argentina and Mexico can be found in the papers in a special issue of *Current Sociology* (56 (2), March 2008). Virtually all of these papers also focus on the content of selected textbooks rather than how and why that content is produced.

2003, p. 694).<sup>2</sup> Given the size of the U.S. higher education sector, and the relatively early success of sociology there, it is perhaps not surprising that the introductory sociology textbook has a distinctive history. But the pressures of market forces on the presentation of scholarly ideas in textbook form are growing everywhere as higher education expands throughout the world (Goldin and Katz 2008). In this sense, the U.S. experience is likely to be broadly relevant elsewhere (Platt 2008a).

To explore how and why textbooks take the form they do, we begin by documenting a startling puzzle: American textbook sociology almost universally produces a distinctive kind of content about the theoretical core of the discipline, one which was by all accounts abandoned by American sociologists at least three decades ago. To account for the persistence of the remarkably out-of-date theoretical frames, we explore its sources by analyzing the logic of the market for higher education texts, the characteristics of authors and readers of these texts, and the logic of reproduction over time. We draw upon content analysis of the texts to document the problem, and then turn to an analysis of the textbook field that draws upon in-depth interviews with most of the authors and editors of recent introductory sociology texts to explore answers to our puzzle.

### *What is textbook sociology? Mapping the field*

The important place of the textbook in the logic of the scholarly production of an academic discipline has been noted – if rarely subjected to systematic scrutiny – in the philosophy of science. As a way of introducing our subject matter, Table I provides an overview – akin to the typology of the discipline Burawoy (2005) has recently advanced to situate what he calls “public sociology” – that allows us to characterize the place of textbook sociology in the practice of contemporary professional sociology. The two sides of the table reflect the audiences (disciplinary or not) and the subject matters (original research or application versus disciplinary ideas and theories).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we draw upon interviews with contemporary introductory sociology textbook authors (N = STET), which when quoting we identify by letter (“Author Interview A”), as well as interviews with editors responsible for a large majority of the

textbooks on the market. However, because the number of editors is small, in order to maintain confidentiality we do not identify them any further. For additional methodological details, see section 4 of the paper.

TABLE I  
*Professional Sociology and Textbook Sociology*

	Audience	
	Disciplinary	Non-Disciplinary
<b>Subject Matter</b>		
<i>Substantive, Original</i>	Research Sociology	Public/Policy Sociology
<i>Disciplinary Ideas</i>	Critical Sociology	Textbook/Handbook Sociology

In this typology, “research sociology” would include the bulk of original research and empirically-based theory building that sociologists undertake and publish in journals and research monographs. “Policy” and “public” sociology are collapsed here, as both share the goal of reaching and influencing a broader non-sociological audience. “Critical” sociology – while a minor presence in sociology as a whole – nonetheless represents a distinct type of professional engagement in which dissecting and challenging the assumptions, categories, and concepts of research sociology is the central focus of investigation.

“Textbook/handbook” sociology stands clearly distinct from the other forms of scholarly production of professional sociologists. Its audience may be professional (in handbook form), but the bulk of readers of these writings are aimed at students. Textbook and handbook sociology draws upon disciplinary ideas and debates (as well as material from popular media), but unlike critical sociology it does not seek to challenge or transcend, but merely to digest and disseminate them. Within the category of “textbook/handbook” sociology, there is important further variety. Although we commonly think of textbook sociology proper in relation to undergraduate education, the parallels with other types of sociological writings suggest that this conception is far too simplistic. The professional “review essay”, for example, shares much common ground with textbook sociology: an attempt to summarize the literature of a sub-field or a particular topic, but for a professional disciplinary audience attempting to “get up to speed” quickly as well as for newcomers to the field. Demand for this type of sociology appears to be growing, as the research literatures and findings in subfields multiply over time

and produce demand for theoretical simplification.<sup>3</sup> The other type of textbook sociology, which does not have as its exclusive audience undergraduate college students, is the subfield textbook. Across all sociological subfields there are books that provide an introduction to the subject, pitched at varying levels of sophistication from those that seek to appeal to upper-division sociology courses to those aimed at graduate students and researchers.

Finally, there are two types of textbooks aimed almost solely at lower-division students. The “primer” is a short, introductory book, typically around 100–150 pages in length, that provides a brief introduction and overview of the field of sociology. They are similar to textbooks in their ambition to present sociology to beginning students, but they make no attempt to be comprehensive and provide a concise vision (with a distinct author’s voice) of the sociological enterprise.<sup>4</sup> Full-length introductory textbooks, by contrast, aim at entry-level (lower-division) survey courses. It is the latter that is the focus of our investigation here. The full-length textbooks vastly outstrip primers in terms of sales and use, constituting in many cases the sole or primary reading in many introductory sociology courses in the United States.

### *Textbook sociology in the American context*

We have already noted that the particular forms textbook sociology take will vary in different market contexts, disciplines, and over time. In the case of American sociology, textbooks began to be produced in the U.S. as early as 1879 (Spencer 2004 [1879]) and 1883 (Ward 1897 [1883]); indeed an even earlier *A Treatise on Sociology: Theoretical and Practical* by a defender of the social system of slavery in the U.S. South (Hughes 1854) is sometimes said to be the first sociology textbook (see also Fitzhugh 1854).

In its formative years in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American sociologists produced relatively few texts, generally

<sup>3</sup> One example of this can be seen in the ever growing number of *Handbooks* across sociological subfields. These contain review essays presented largely to advanced graduate students and researchers.

<sup>4</sup> The list of authors of short introductory primers is likewise quite distinguished. Since

1959, when *The Sociological Imagination* first appeared and defined a space for this type of text, there have been primers by Adorno, Collins, Dahrendorf, Elias, Giddens, Homans and Nisbet, among others.

authored by leading figures in the discipline. In this period, textbooks were the primary type of sociological writing that had a sufficient market in the U.S. to find a publisher (Buxton and Turner 1992, pp. 375-376, Faris 1964, p. 24, Turner and Turner 1990, p. 160-65). This was a uniquely American phenomenon. As Sorokin put it in 1929, "the bulk of sociological works produced in Europe has been composed almost entirely out of monographic works... In America the situation has been rather quite the opposite. The energy of the American sociologists to a much greater extent has been spent in the production of the text-book literature" (Sorokin 1929, p. 58). In this early period, textbook writing was an important pathway to disciplinary leadership; Odum (1951, p. 254) reports that an astounding twenty-seven of the first forty presidents of the American Sociological Association had authored introductory textbooks before becoming president of the professional association.

The very first of these texts were written at a demanding level, often introducing original conceptual or theoretical schemes.<sup>5</sup> As the discipline of sociology began to grow, however, and regular undergraduate courses in sociology came to be offered in most universities, demands for simpler introductory texts aimed solely at beginning undergraduate students encouraged the growth of the modern undergraduate introductory text. Between 1925 and 1945, some 33 introductory sociology textbooks appeared (Hobbs 1951, pp. 179-80), the large majority of which were published by commercial publishers and crafted solely for beginning students (Odum 1954). As a diverse market of choices appeared, instructors could choose from a menu of texts, written for a variety of audiences. Among the best-selling works in the inter-war years was that of Wisconsin sociologist E.A. Ross (1923). Odum [1951, p. 13] claims on the basis of information from the publisher that its various editions sold over 500,000 copies combined through 1950. For a time after 1940, Ogburn and Nimkoff (1940) was a leading text (Hobbs 1951, p. 28). These continued to be preeminent figures in the discipline: both Ross and Ogburn served as presidents of the American Sociological Association, and Ogburn's influence on the development of quantitative empirical research is of fundamental importance (Laslett 1990).

<sup>5</sup> The influential early text of Park and Burgess (1920), for example, contains important original theoretical ideas alongside some

basic textual materials. It was in this text, for example, that Park first introduced his classical model of ethnic assimilation.

The postwar boom in American higher education in general, and sociology in particular, accelerated even further demand for texts that could be used at all levels of the curriculum. The 1950s and 1960s were periods of exceptional growth and diversification in the textbook market. With enrollments in American higher education in general expanding rapidly, and interest in sociology peaking by the late 1960s, sociology faculty, especially those teaching at large state universities with significant undergraduate enrollments, report being frequently offered the opportunity to write introductory textbooks (sometimes with significant financial inducements) in this period (Author Interview A; cf. Graham 1988, p. 357).

A landmark in this period was the appearance (in 1955) of the textbook by Leonard Broom (UCLA) and Philip Selznick (U.C. Berkeley). The Broom and Selznick text was, by all accounts, the dominant introductory sociology textbook in the 1960s and 1970s, going through many editions at the peak of student interest in the discipline. It would play a pivotal role in structuring the presentation of introductory sociology (Graham 1988, p. 360; Author Interview B).<sup>6</sup> In particular, it was highly influential in crafting the organization of the intro textbook into core and peripheral topical areas, with theory, method, culture, social structure, socialization and inequality representing the front (core) part of the book, and chapters on various topics in institutional and macrosociology placed at the end.

The fact that Broom and Selznick was the clear market leader for a long time hardly deterred others from entering in the era of rapid growth (Brown 1976). Saturation of the market would eventually follow. By 1980, one veteran textbook author reports being able to identify 72 textbooks available, ironically at the very moment when enrollment in sociology courses had begun a fairly steep decline in the U.S. until stabilizing and recovering slightly in the 1990s (Author Interview C; see also McGee 1985, p. 194). As we will show below, market contraction since 1980 has reduced the total number of texts on the market quite dramatically; by 2004, we were able to identify just 30 introductory sociology textbooks on the market.

<sup>6</sup> Both were prominent figures in the discipline, especially Selznick. Broom taught at UCLA, worked on various topics in the subfields of social stratification and ethnicity, and was *American Sociological Review* editor 1955-57. Selznick taught at Berkeley and was

a major figure in organizational sociology (authoring the classic *TVA and the Grassroots* [1949] and *The Organizational Weapon* (1954) by the time the first edition of the textbook appeared.



*The vision of sociology in American introductory texts*

As we noted at the outset of the paper, there has been a veritable industry of content analysis of American sociology textbooks (references available upon request). These assessments of introductory textbook content are almost uniformly negative in their evaluation. Among the major concerns critics have raised are that textbooks treat topics in isolation from one another, fail to properly situate the topic in a global context, provide misleading overviews of the state-of-the-art in various subfields, neglect completely or largely fail to properly consider important topics, fail to provide students with any means of adjudicating between competing theories and, finally, that the texts are weighed down with vague definitions and concepts that professional sociologists themselves cannot agree upon (*e.g.* Ferree and Hall 1996; Best and Schweingruber 2003, Form and Hamilton 2003, Nolan 2003).<sup>7</sup>

These debates raise important pedagogical and professional concerns, but they are not our focus here. Rather, our goal is to introduce an account of *how* the textbook market permits, indeed encourages, outdated material to persist so long after it loses any credible intellectual foundation in the discipline at large. In order to carry out this investigation, however, we must begin by identifying some distinctive textbook content that will serve as a point of departure for our analysis. While there are many examples, we focus our attention in this paper on one critical topic that almost all introductory texts include in their first chapter: the introduction of core theoretical traditions of contemporary sociology. This focus is vitally important in its own right, as a definition of the sociological landscape, and pedagogically for establishing the key questions and debates of the discipline. Its importance frequently extends well beyond the “theory” chapter, as authors refer to these traditions to guide students through the various substantive topics treated later in the books.

<sup>7</sup> From their published defenses, American textbook authors appear to be well-aware of these criticisms, and indeed have offered measured and reasoned responses. In 1988, the journal *Teaching Sociology* published a symposium with the responses of 16 textbook authors to some of these criticisms. It is also worth noting that in at least a few cases, criticisms of the textbooks appear to have

had some impact. The highly visible lead paper by Ferree and Hall in the December 1996 issue of the *American Sociological Review*, for example, was spontaneously mentioned by several authors in our interviews as encouraging a more “integrative” framework for presenting race, class, and gender inequalities.

To examine how core sociological traditions are presented in recent textbooks, we conducted a content analysis of the 38 books on the sociology market in 1999 and then replicated that analysis for the 30 textbooks on the market in 2004 (a full list of texts identified is available upon request). To identify the “books on the market”, we included any introductory textbook with an edition published at least once in the preceding three years [*i.e.* 1996-1999 and 2001-04 respectively]). To ensure a complete sample of all textbooks on the market, we triangulated from various sources, in particular consulting the 1999 and 2004 editions of *Books in Print*, looking for advertisements in recent sociological journals, and consulting with textbook publishers at various sociological meetings. For each book, we examined the most recent edition available for both periods. We have also updated our analysis by examining (1) the most recent editions of some of the best-selling books; and (2) the handful of new books that have entered the market since 2004.

In order to minimize coding errors and other ambiguities, we settled on simple counts of the *section headings* identifying theoretical traditions in the discipline. Headings explicitly signal to students the importance of a theoretical tradition, although other coding approaches (such as counting pages or fractions thereof) yield a very similar, if somewhat more confusing, picture. The result of our analysis of how theory is presented in these books is striking (data tables available upon request). Fully 35 of the 38 books in the 1999 sample contain headings referencing structural-functionalism, 34 refer to conflict theory, and 30 refer to symbolic interactionism in the social theory section. By contrast, the next highest theoretical tradition provided with a distinct heading is feminism – and that is found in only three of the textbooks in 1999 (up to six by 2004). The handful of other traditions given an explicit section heading are mentioned in just one or two books. The 2004 sample of texts was similar, with a slightly greater number of additional traditions referenced.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, underneath the section headings a diverse range of theorists are sometimes discussed. Marx and Weber, for example, are frequently discussed underneath the label of the “conflict” tradition, Mead under “symbolic interaction”, and Durkheim, Parsons, and Merton under “structural functionalism”. Conflict theory is frequently used in these texts as a broad umbrella label to group together

<sup>8</sup> These perspectives were: social evolution, sociology, postmodernism, reductionism, critical theory, and ecological theory. social exchange, rational choice, humanist

a diverse range of critical and radical theories and theorists, including Marxism, feminism, and critical race theorists.

While American sociology students reading different texts might take away different understandings of what the core traditions are, there can be no question that a single dominant triad – the “holy trinity”, as several textbook authors characterized it to us in our interviews, or the “paradigm model” as others call it – structures the presentation of the theoretical core of contemporary sociology in the vast majority of these textbooks.

Given its remarkable pervasiveness, we sought to understand the origins of the functionalism/conflict/interactionism triad. A 1971 textbook contrasted two broad traditions in sociological thought: “conflict” versus “consensus” sociology (Hodges 1971). While this exact distinction did not take hold, the paradigm model made its initial appearance in the first edition of a very successful textbook by Donald Light and Suzanne Keller (1975). From there it was adopted by the wildly successful best-selling textbook of Ian Robertson, first published in 1977. Robertson in particular is the widely acknowledged market leader from the late 1970s onward, and the format and approach of his book seems to have strongly influenced other authors who followed in his footsteps (Eitzen [1988, p. 391] even refers to a “Robertson clone syndrome” in the late 1980s).

Once the Robertson book became the best-seller, others moved quickly to adopt many of its features, including its framing of the theoretical core of the discipline. The transformation was extraordinarily rapid. Examining nineteen textbooks published in 1978-80 (*i.e.* shortly after the new Light/Keller/Robertson orthodoxy had been established), Herrick (1980, p. 618) finds that *every* text he examined identifies functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism as the core theoretical approaches of the discipline. It is striking to note that an earlier review of textbooks published from 1958 through 1977 (the year Robertson appeared) found no evidence of such uniformity, nor any evidence that the textbooks presented the discipline as internally divided in this way (Perrucci 1980).

### *Misrepresenting sociology's core*

Identifying the persistence of the so-called paradigm model of sociology in introductory textbooks is only a puzzle to the extent that it is very much at odds with the actual state of the discipline (at least as

practised in the United States). Before we proceed any further, then, it is worth pausing to consider more precisely how contemporary American sociology textbooks present the theoretical core of the discipline. To give readers a flavor, we present examples from the two long-standing best-selling books (as of 2005), and one of the newest textbooks to appear by a prominent younger sociologist. The best-selling text for most of the past twenty years is that of John Macionis. A recent (2006) edition of the book suggests the following:

A theoretical paradigm is a basic image of society that guides thinking and research. Sociology has three major approaches: the structural-functional paradigm, the social-conflict paradigm, and the symbolic-interaction paradigm [...]

The structural-functional paradigm is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. As its name suggests, this paradigm points to social structure, meaning any relatively stable pattern of social behavior. Social structure gives our lives shape, whether it be in families, the workplace, or the classroom. This paradigm looks for a structure's social functions, or consequences for the operation of society as a whole. All social structure – from simple handshake to complex religious ritual – functions to keep society going, at least in its present form [...]

The social-conflict paradigm is a framework for building theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change. Unlike the structural-functional emphasis on solidarity, this approach highlights inequality. Sociologists guided by this paradigm investigate how factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age are linked to the unequal distribution of money, power, education, and social prestige. A conflict analysis rejects the idea that social structure promotes the operation of society as a whole, pointing out instead how social patterns benefit some people while depriving others.

The structural-functional and social-conflict paradigms share a macro-level orientation, meaning a broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole [...]. Sociology also has a micro-level orientation, a close-up focus on social interaction in specific situations. Exploring urban life in this way occurs at street level, where researchers might observe how children interact on a school playground, how pedestrians wait to board a bus, or how well-dressed people respond to a homeless person. The symbolic-interaction paradigm, then, is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of everyday interactions of individuals.

Until very recently, the book widely regarded as the second best-selling sociology textbook was that of James Henslin. In the 2005 edition of his text, under the heading “Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology”, Henslin writes:

Sociologists use three major theories: symbolic interactionism, functional analysis, and conflict theory [...]. The central idea of functional analysis is that

society is a whole unit, made up of inter-related parts that work together [...] Conflict theory provides a third perspective on social life. Unlike the functionalists who view society as a harmonious whole, with its parts working together, conflict theorists stress that society is composed of groups that engage in fierce competition for scarce resources. Although alliances or cooperation may prevail on the surface, beneath that surface lies a struggle for power.

Finally, consider the discussion of “sociological theory” in chapter one in one of the most recent new textbooks (Conley 2009). In the section entitled “Modern Sociological Theories,” the author identifies functionalism and five other traditions: conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminist theory, postmodernism, and “midrange” theory, situating them historically and noting their transcendence, even while maintaining the basic model. He writes:

Although it was born in a tradition of community studies that avoided grand theory and drew its insights from the careful observation of people in their environments, American sociology was largely characterized by the concept of functionalism for much of the twentieth century [...] functionalism [is] the theory that various social institutions and processes in society exist to serve some important (or necessary) function to keep society running.

Functionalism took a beating in the 1960s, when it was usurped by a number of theories frequently labeled Marxist theory or conflict theory. Whereas functionalists painted a picture of social harmony as the well-oiled parts of a societal machine working together (with some friction and the occasional breakdown), conflict theory viewed society through exactly the opposite type of lens [...] conflict among competing interests is a basic, animating force of any society

Functionalism and conflict theory take extreme (if opposing) positions on the fundamental nature of society. Today most sociologists see societies as demonstrating characteristics of both consensus and conflict and believe that social change does result from both revolution and evolution.

Textbook presentations of “structural functionalism” not only postulate a vision of society that few contemporary American sociologists hold, but also typically reproduces a version of the most grandly ambitious of Parsons’ (1951) mid-century work, where whole social systems are explained by their underlying functions (see the examples above). It is, in other words, a particular and narrow version of functionalism that is routinely invoked (see the above textbook quotations for typical examples), largely devoid of any role for social action that Parsons’ modern defenders would insist upon (Alexander 1984, Munch 1987 [1982]). To be sure, the textbooks usually also invoke Merton’s (1957) famous distinction between “latent” and “manifest” functions to elaborate a functionalist paradigm that is more broadly applicable to a wide range of social phenomena. But they

virtually never advance beyond this to offer a more nuanced version of functionalist social theory in which the social action foundations of Parsons' functionalism would be made clear. More troubling, given the extent to which the books highlight the importance of structural functionalism, is the nearly universal absence of any mention of the work of Niklas Luhmann, whose many writings have offered a radical and influential extension of the structural functionalist legacy (see *e.g.* Luhmann 1995 [1984]).

Even taking into account the strongly American bias of textbooks aimed at the huge American market, there are many reasons to be skeptical of the central place of structural functionalism at the core of contemporary sociological theory. Who now reads Parsons? Structural functionalism has not commanded much – if any – significant influence in American sociology for at least three decades. Indeed, elaborate (if over-drawn) obituaries for the functionalist paradigm had already appeared by 1970 (Gouldner 1970, Friedrichs 1970). Periodic attempts to revive it (Colomy 1990, Alexander 1998) have found few, if any followers in the United States. One can still find examples of functionalist analyses in contemporary sociology (*e.g.* Wacquant 2009), and functionalist assumptions can be read into certain kinds of positivist American sociology (see *e.g.* Agger 2001). And to be sure, important parts of the functionalist paradigm have been built upon by more recent European social theorists (Joas and Knobl 2009 [2004], pp. 334–38). But the shortcomings of functionalist models in empirical social science research investigating causal processes are well-known (see Elster 1982 for an authoritative statement), and its days as an influential theoretical standpoint in American sociology ended decades ago.

While structural functionalism had a long and influential pedigree in American and international sociology, even if its contemporary relevance is rather limited, the same cannot be said for the second leg of the triad, “conflict theory”. It is true that the study of conflict, and “conflict sociology”, has a long and venerable history in the discipline (see *e.g.* Park and Burgess 1920; Coser 1954; Collins 1975; see also Joas and Knobl 2009 [2004], chap. 8 for an overview). Elements of a theoretical challenge to Parsonian functionalism under the banner of conflict theory can be found in the 1950s and 1960s in the work of Coser (1954), Dahrendorf (1959), and Rex (1970 [1961]). But despite these efforts, no coherent “conflict theory” paradigm ever fully materialized. As Joas and Knobl (2009 [2004], p. 185) put it, “what is striking is that [...] there was no one definitive author who ‘led’ the

development of conflict theory; neither were there authoritative texts which might have demonstrated conclusively the fruitfulness of the new ‘paradigm’; [...] there existed no uniform tradition to nourish the conflict theoretical approach’.

In spite of its incoherence, the label “conflict theory” provided a convenient umbrella under which the small but growing movement of radical sociologists briefly identified themselves without explicitly embracing Marxism (*e.g.* Horton 1966). As radical sociology grew and splintered, and Marxism and other radical traditions became popular in the mainstream of the discipline by the late 1970s, the utility of the “conflict theory” label quickly fell into disuse. The contrast between a “sociology of order” and a “sociology of conflict”, as posited by Horton (1966), simply could no longer capture a meaningful theoretical cleavage in the discipline. Conflict theory was accordingly given its last rites long ago (McQuarle and Murray 1983, Wood 1983). It has virtually no meaning today outside the world of American textbook sociology, although one can find the term used occasionally in sub-fields like the sociology of crime and deviance (*e.g.* Hagan and Shedd 2005) and elsewhere (see Joas and Knobl 2009 [2004], pp. 189-93 for other examples).

The prominence of symbolic interactionism (SI) in introductory textbooks raises a somewhat different set of challenges. With its roots in pragmatist thought and the early “Chicago School” of sociology, the SI “perspective” – like conflict theory – emerged in the late 1960s “as a convenient and welcoming home for many sociological malcontents frustrated by functionalist orthodoxy” (Fine 1993, p. 63, Mullins 1973; Joas and Knobl [2009/2004], p. 139) suggest that “while interactionists criticized functionalism, they came to terms with it by means of a kind of topical division of labor”). In contrast to conflict theory, SI remains an identifiable theoretical approach. Its adherents, for example, maintain an organizational presence through two journals (*Symbolic Interaction* and the annual *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*) and a professional association (the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction). Despite the fact that SI is still a viable theoretical paradigm in American sociology, there is still much debate over its contemporary relevance. Even supporters question the current influence of SI, arguing that it is no longer central to research (McCall 2006), is largely absent from courses in social theory (Howard 2007), and has become a field with few shared assumptions (Charmaz and Lofland 2003). Those who do argue for its vibrancy contend that its current influence is underestimated because its insights have been so

completely assimilated into mainstream sociology (Maines 2003), a cooptation that Fine (1993) characterizes as SI's triumph.

This "triumph" of SI, though, is precisely the problem of using it – as almost all introductory textbooks do – to represent the entire corpus of microsociology. There are a wide array of theoretical models that emphasize the importance of individual level processes, and micro-level interactions, in the formation of social phenomena. Indeed, it is precisely at the level of microsociology that some of the most active recent theoretical debates in American sociology have occurred, for example on agent-based modeling (*e.g.* Epstein and Axtell 1996, Axelrod 1997) and rational choice models of behavior (Coleman 1990). Thus, while SI's presence in introductory textbooks is defensible, its role as a stand-in for various interpretive and individual-level perspectives is not.

Looking at the bigger picture, it is striking how the image of contemporary sociological theory presented in these books are versions of what Mills (1959) once famously described as "grand theory", at a time when such theories have virtually disappeared in American sociology. Further, the theories are presented as being in deep conflict with one another, when such paradigm conflicts have also virtually disappeared from contemporary American sociology. As Martin (2003, p. 2) has recently put it, "all is quiet on the theoretical front ... recent discussion of practically any conventional opposition (the list includes but is not limited to macro/micro, social/individual, nature/nurture, static/dynamic, structure/agency, quantitative/qualitative) concludes with a resounding verdict of 'both'". Merton's (1968) call for "middle range" theories amenable to testing through empirical research is by now nearly universal in the mainstream of the discipline as currently practised in the United States (for better or worse) (Joas and Knobl (2009 [2004], p. 199).

The textbook presentation of three radically different ways of conceptualizing societies and social life, by contrast, cuts directly against the movement towards professionalization and normal science, unquestionably the dominant trend in American sociology (Abend 2006). Indeed, the paradigms-in-conflict model conforms to the images and stereotypes of some of the prejudices of the discipline's sharpest critics in supporting the view of sociology as a bitterly divided discipline in the United States (see *e.g.* Horowitz 1994, Cole 2001). What is perhaps most remarkable is that even if the presentation of the theoretical core of sociological theory in introductory textbooks could have plausibly divided the field up in this way in



about 1970 or 1975, thirty or thirty-five years on it appears virtually incomprehensible to American research sociologists as a characterization of the theoretical core of the discipline. The puzzle is not necessarily how the paradigm model ever came to be seen as a plausible representation of the discipline's central theoretical ideas, but rather how little it changed over a very long period of time in such a central form in sociology textbooks. While there has been some expansion of other theoretical traditions warranting section headings in recent years, we find that the basic tripartite distinction persists (results available upon request).

### *Understanding textbook sociology*

If there is no evidence in contemporary sociology that the standard tripartite model of contemporary sociological theory provides a meaningful way of framing the core of the discipline, why does it persist? Our search for answers led to an analysis of the conditions under which textbooks are produced, and more specifically how and where disciplinary ideas meet market incentives and constraints. In view of the financial risks, and potential rewards, of introductory textbook publishing, it is hardly surprising that the creation of a textbook will depart from other kinds of scholarly writings. For the latter, where significant profits are extremely rare, authors are largely left to their own devices to write their books (with greater editorial assistance provided for the occasional "trade" books that publishers believe can find a lay audience). To reduce the uncertainty for textbooks, however, publishers utilize far more extensive and intrusive models of editorial control, which can follow a logic in which "books write authors", as Agger (1989b) has pithily put it. The power asymmetries between authors and publishers are far more consequential in the case of the textbooks than conventional scholarly manuscripts, or even scholarly trade books seeking to reach a broader, non-academic audience (Coser 1979, Eitzen 1988).

But exactly *how* do market forces shape the scholarly content of textbooks? To anticipate our answer in broad strokes, both demand and supply side factors come into play. On the supply side, publishers employ extensive internal and external reviewers, conduct "marketing" surveys, and editors and sales agents spend a lot of time talking to potential text adopters in order to assess where the "market" is. These

efforts focus primarily on whether the textbook fits into the existing demand from introductory sociology instructors across the broad expanse of American higher education. And until very recently, the vast majority of American textbook authors have been drawn from the ranks of teaching colleges where serious research is less common than at the major research universities. The supply of authors has, at least until very recently, been skewed against the research-oriented parts of the discipline.

On the demand side, the market for introductory books is driven by the perceived needs and preferences of instructors in what Platt (2008a, p. 148) playfully characterizes as “the lower part of the iceberg” of American higher education. The vast majority of introductory sociology instructors who adopt textbooks teach far from the major research and top liberal arts colleges of American higher education. The radical inequalities of the American educational system produce this division: a relatively small number of elite private and research-oriented public universities that dominate the world rankings of institutional quality, combined with a vast hinterland of public four-year and two-year “community” colleges where the majority of students are located. The instructors in these institutions have heavy teaching loads and few incentives to demand updated textbooks that would require different corresponding lectures.

The model we thus suggest has four components: (1) authors who come from parts of the profession who are not oriented towards state-of-the-art research; (2) market dynamics in which successful textbooks are worth millions of dollars but unsuccessful books can incur significant losses, motivating publishers to pay close attention to supplying the “right” kind of book; (3) a market skewed heavily towards the “bottom of the iceberg”, in which the majority of students take their first sociology course at community colleges or large four-year state schools; (4) publication dynamics in which content, once adopted, becomes difficult to dislodge in future editions of a book.

In order to explore and exemplify how supply and demand factors contribute to the peculiar form in which the disciplinary core is presented, we now turn to evidence from a series of in-depth interviews we conducted between 2003 and 2007 with textbook writers and editors. We sought to interview the first named author (or sole-author) for each textbook on the market. In a few cases, we ended up interviewing the second author instead of the first, but in no case did we interview more than one author of a multi-author team. At the time we initially drew up our list of authors, we worked from the textbooks

that were on the market in the late 1990s. We were able to complete 31 interviews with authors from the 38 texts on our list, or 79 % of all texts on the market. Of those we did not interview, a few refused to participate, one we could not locate, and one was deceased. All authors are quoted in the text anonymously, identified by letter, and all other identifying information has been edited out. We also interviewed a small number of editors, who collectively edit books that represent about 80% of the market.

*Supply side: the role of publishers*

The stakes in textbook publishing are high. In order to reduce risk, publishers do not simply accept manuscripts offered up by authors and revise accordingly. Rather, textbooks are *produced* through a highly bureaucratic process that is unique in scholarly publishing. Publishers have various avenues of input to shape a book once they have signed an author. They employ extensive internal and external reviewers, marketing surveys, and other efforts to discern what kinds of books might succeed. One author summarizes the process as follows:

Before you write the textbook, the main editor or editor-in-chief, will conduct a market survey – he would send out a questionnaire to teachers of intro sociology and then he would send me the results of the survey. Then we set a time to discuss it over the phone, and between me and him and the developmental editor and also some other members of the editorial team [...] from that we come up with some kind of consensus about what subjects I should cover and how I am supposed to cover them, and basically that's it [Author Interview T].

Multiple editors, including a “development editor” who scrutinizes the entire text with an eye to improving presentation and format, are involved in the process of pushing authors towards producing text that addresses the publisher’s sense of the market. One veteran author summarizes some of the ways in which the development editor can push content towards the best-selling books: The acquisitions editor will assign a developmental editor to work with the author. The developmental editor’s job is essentially to help develop that person’s writing strength and develop the manuscript into a stronger statement. One of the things that is often done because publishers want to minimize their risk of bringing out a book that people don’t want to use, they often will say to a DE , [...] “I want you to check this book’s content and approach and coverage and chapter and sequence, the

whole structure of it in relation to, say, Macionis and Henslin, or Schaefer [some best-selling books]” [Author Interview C].

External reviewers are also widely consulted on the suitability of the work for the introductory market (*i.e.* whether or not a text is likely to be widely adopted), and what changes would have to be made to make it more marketable (see Kendall 1999 for an account drawing from her own experiences with external reviewers as a textbook author). Reviewers will be explicitly asked how the proposed manuscript stacks up against the existing books on the market, especially the book the reviewer is currently using in her classes.<sup>9</sup>

We might understand this process by comparing it to filmmaking. The auteur does not consult her prospective audience about what kind of film they might like to watch. But the Hollywood director, having both a large budget and potential losses for the studio, is rarely permitted to make her film without the active involvement of studio personnel and careful evaluations of market demand. The latter, of course, still has considerable discretion, but is far more constrained than the auteur. So too with textbooks. The textbook authors have extensive control over the detailed content of their books. Indeed, when asked specifically about this, authors nearly all report that the content of their book was never dictated to them, and that they were virtually never told they could not include something they wanted in the book. Some view the management process as more of one shaping authors, particularly beginning textbook writers, to move closer to where the publisher believes the market is. Others highlight issues such as the titles and ordering of the chapter, the use of pedagogical devices such as boxed text and fancy graphics, as matters that publishers insist upon while allowing a wide variety of content to be included. However the relationship with the publisher unfolds, it is a carefully managed process.

Further, once a book makes it to a second edition, publishers, reviewers, and adopters combine to make it far more difficult to fundamentally alter an existing book. At this stage, fear of market backlash and loss of market share encourages only tinkering with the

<sup>9</sup> Publishers sometimes also consult external reviewers about the quality of the research reported in various chapters, although our interviews suggest that this appears to be much less consequential than reviews focused on readability and the topics covered. Ritzer (1988) raises questions about the ethics and integrity of the entire process,

suggesting that payments to reviewers amount to bribes to encourage them to adopt particular texts. This practice appears to have once been common, but is said by insiders to be rare today. We do not have the space to evaluate or discuss this point here.

basic formula (and since as little as two years now pass before a “new” edition of the book is produced in order to undercut the used book market, there is considerable pressure to minimize major changes). Here is how one author put this point to us, in commenting how difficult it was to move away from the paradigm model in later editions of her/his book:

One issue occurred to me when we first revised the book and that was this concern I had of how people tend to divide the field among three perspectives – functionalism, conflict, and the interactionist perspective – whether this was a reasonable thing to do because the field doesn’t really divide up that way. The field is very complex and interesting and multi-faceted and I was really interested in dropping that. I didn’t know what to replace it with, but I was interested in replacing it. I said something to the editors and they said that that was interesting and we’ll put something in the questionnaire about that for the reviewers. What we got back from reviewers is that that is more-or-less the way people teach the course and that’s what they like, so we ended up not changing it. This tends to be what people use when they teach intro, so it’s a feature that we have to include. I’m not sure it’s all bad because if you were going to try to change it, you would turn your book into an idiosyncratic book. You’d have to find a new market for the book than the market that we have (Author Interview L).

This editorial lock-in from first edition onward means that existing books are unlikely to significantly alter key components of the book such as the presentation of the three paradigms once the first edition is published.

Changes wrought by corporate consolidation in publishing have altered the character of supply-side factors. Many of these changes are well-known and described elsewhere (*e.g.* Schiffrin 2000, Miller 2006). The basic facts of corporate consolidation as experienced by sociology textbook authors are well-described by one senior author:

A company like Peacock – they had this book that had been around since the 60s – but it was done as a one-color book, very simple, it was a fairly low-cost book. As the investment necessary to compete went up, people like Ted Peacock simply couldn’t stay in the game. What tended to happen was that companies were folded into other companies [...] there were as many as 25 publishers publishing in the intro sociology market. Now, for all intents and purposes, the real game is limited to the following: Under the Pearson umbrella is Prentice-Hall, which is probably the largest, and Allyn & Bacon, which is considerably smaller, McGraw-Hill, and International Thompson. McGraw-Hill absorbed Random House and Harcourt-Brace became part of International Thompson. So really, in terms of sociology, most of the titles are published either by Pearson, McGraw-Hill or ITP [Author Interview C].

Market contraction has had a number of consequences. Perhaps the most important outcome has been a significant reduction in the number of new books being published. As one editor put it,

There aren't a lot of new intro books published each year, partly because there aren't a lot of publishers anymore. So you've got fewer people trying out something new [...] But when you think about how many different publishers used to compete for the sociology market and how many have been bought up – we're not publishing all those books anymore [Editor Interview].

Our analysis of the textbook market confirms that this contraction in the market has occurred. The number of new titles being published has shriveled. Since 2000, we are able to identify only a handful of full-length new textbooks introduced in the American market (Lindsay and Beach 2000, Anderson and Taylor 2000, Brym and Lie 2004, Turner 2006, Kimmel 2007, Alexander and Thompson 2008, Conley 2009). At less than one new text per year, the current rate of new market entrance is vastly below the pace of new textbook introduction from the 1920s to the 1980s (Odum 1951, Hobbs 1951, Macionis 1988). The market contraction corollary suggests an important mechanism of reproduction: most of the new books either do not employ, or more commonly deemphasize, the functionalism/conflict/interactionism triad (especially the Turner, Kimmel, and Alexander and Thompson volumes), while the older market leaders continue to use the standard paradigm model.

*Supply side: who writes textbook sociology?*

However much publishers and editors may seek to intervene, textbooks are ultimately written by authors who have particular visions of the discipline, come from particular backgrounds, and work in particular kinds of institutions. In his classical 1943 analysis of introductory “social problems” textbooks, C. Wright Mills proposed a sociology of knowledge model to account for why the images of “social pathology” took the form they did in the texts he analyzed. Mills argues that the small-town backgrounds of most of the authors of the texts he surveyed was critical to establishing the sources of their attraction to theories of social dislocation and disorganization they highlighted in characterizing the problems of urban America. In the case of contemporary introductory textbooks, it is certainly possible that the authors have a far stronger affinity for “theories” like structural functionalism or conflict theory than those working at the research-oriented “professional” frontiers of the discipline. Indeed, as we will see, a substantial majority of American textbook authors do not teach at research universities, and frequently do not have substantial research records suggestive of close connection to the research

mainstream. This phenomenon of American textbook sociology has been noted, including publicly by one of best-selling textbook authors himself (e.g. Macionis 1988, Author Interviews C, L).

A sociology of knowledge approach also sheds light on the supply side by calling attention to specific differences between sociology – a fairly diffuse, fragmented discipline – and more putatively centralized fields such as physics (Leavitt and Nass 1989). Even relative to cognate social science disciplines such as economics, psychology, and political science, sociology exhibits an unusual degree of disciplinary fragmentation and disorder, with few universally agreed upon theories or concepts (e.g. Cole 2001). This relative openness creates the possibility for multiple definitions of “sociology”, and for less centralized control over the intellectual content of textbooks than in other disciplines with more agreed-upon principles. Paradoxically, however, the decentralization of disciplinary knowledge may prevent scrutiny of “out-of-date” material that more centralized disciplinary knowledge systems preclude.

Looking at the social positions of textbook authors in America is indeed striking. Nearly all of the introductory textbooks that were market leaders from the late 1970s through the early 2000s were written by sociologists teaching at neither leading research universities nor highly prestigious liberal arts colleges (data available upon request). None of the top five bestselling books as of 2004 – according to the universal consensus in the industry at the time – had a first-author on the faculty at a top American “research” university, and only three among the next ten sellers in 2003 are authored by scholars teaching at such institutions. The other authors of leading books all teach in liberal arts colleges or second tier research institutions, and none of the highest-rated liberal arts colleges are represented in the top-selling group. Best-selling textbook author John Macionis (1988, p. 420) once put the point forcefully in print:

since the 1960s, most of the successful introductory texts have been written by people who are not known as researchers. Why? I suspect that at least part of the explanation is that sociology is more divided theoretically than other disciplines. Thus a sociologist/text author with a research reputation is likely to be tagged immediately as some *type* of sociologist, which will appeal to some adopters only at the cost of turning off others. At any rate, writing a sociology text is presently a good way to become famous on the basis of being unknown.

Consistent with this interpretation, we found considerable evidence of a kind of self-conscious distancing of textbook authors from mainstream professional sociology in the United States. For example, we asked a number of textbook writers about the *American Sociological Review*

and the *American Journal of Sociology*, the flagship journals of American sociology. Several authors responded with considerable disdain:

I tried to avoid being influenced by the kind of sociology that you read in ASR and the AJS. If there are two pieces of data in front of me and one comes from ASR and the other comes from Newsweek or the New York Times, I would choose the latter because a lot of studies in sociology journals are extremely boring and can turn off the readers [Author Interview P].

Another put it even more bluntly:

I think the ASR sucks – it’s become a third-rate goofy econ and applied history journal [Author Interview L].

To be sure, these were minority views, and indeed the aspirations of some authors to represent the best the discipline has to offer is surely very high (Hess 1988). But a systematic examination of citations in introductory texts also reveals many texts that rely heavily on media accounts or other non-professional sources (Babchuk and Keith 1995, see also Davis 1994).<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps equally striking is the fact that in terms of theoretical orientations, the preferences of textbook writers appear to stand quite apart from the theoretical mainstream of the discipline. In our interviews, we posed textbook authors an open-ended question asking which theoretical tradition the author personally associates him/herself with, and a forced-choice item asking respondents to rate the importance of various theoretical traditions for contemporary sociology (on a 1-7 Likert scale) (see table II). Symbolic interactionism is the theoretical framework of choice for the largest group of text writers (with 12 of the 28 answering the question with symbolic interactionism as a first or second choice (four mention it as a second identity), while one-fourth of those responding (9 of the 28) identified structural-functionalism as a favored theoretical stance (four as first choice, five as a second). A scattering of responses identify various left theories (Marxism, feminism) and in a few cases the more generic “conflict theory” favored by many textbook writers.

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that although relatively few new texts have appeared in recent years, most have been authored by prominent sociologists: Margaret Anderson and Howard Taylor (2000), the significantly revised version of the Anthony Giddens textbook (now co-authored by Mitchell Duneier, Richard Appelbaum, and Deborah Carr, first pub-

lished in 2002), Jonathan Turner (2006), Jeffrey Alexander and Kenneth Thompson (2008), Michael Kimmel (2007), and Dalton Conley (2009). All of these depart, albeit in varying degrees, from the standard framing found in the best-selling books from the late 1970s onward (with Turner, Kimmel, and Alexander/Thompson dropping it altogether).



TABLE II  
*Authors' Theoretical Orientations and Beliefs About Important Contemporary Theories*

<b>Author's Own Theoretical Preference (First Choice Only) (N=30):</b>		
Symbolic Interactionism	8	28.6 %
Conflict Theory	6	21.4 %
Functionalism	3	10.6 %
Marxism	2	7.1 %
Critical Theory	1	3.5 %
Political Ecology	1	3.5 %
Weberian	1	3.5 %
Other	2	7.1 %
"Nothing" or "None"	4	14.3 %
Did not answer	2	7.1 %

Note: Question wording: "What theoretical tradition in sociology do you yourself most closely identify with?"

<b>Importance for Contemporary Theory (Seven Point Likert Scale) (N=30)</b>	
Feminism:	5.7 (1.6)
Symbolic Interactionism:	5.6 (1.4)
Marxism:	5.2 (1.7)
Structural Functionalism:	3.7 (1.7)
Post-Modernism:	3.8 (1.4)
Rational Choice:	4.1 (1.8)
Post-Colonial Theory:	3.7 (2.0)

Notes: Standard deviations in parenthesis. Question wording: "On a seven point scale, with '1' being very unimportant and '7' being crucially important, how important would you say the following theoretical perspectives are for contemporary sociological research?"

This result suggests one reason why symbolic interactionism would receive so much prominent attention in introductory textbooks: it literally commands the allegiance of nearly half of the textbook authors. But the bottom half of table II presents a somewhat different picture. Here we see that while symbolic interactionism rates fairly highly (5.4 on the 7-point scale respondents were offered) in terms of importance to contemporary research (reflecting its disproportionate influence

among textbook writers), structural functionalism scores very poorly (3.7 on the 7-point scale). For several textbook authors, structural-functionalism is one of the top two theoretical traditions they identify with; but many others regard it with some disdain and on average it is not well-regarded.

*Supply side: disciplinary forces?*

Does sociology differ from other social science disciplines to such an extent as to account for the disjuncture between mainstream of the discipline and introductory textbooks? And does the fact that we are focused on *American* sociology, compared to sociologies elsewhere, play a role? The paradigmatic contrast within American higher education is with economics, long regarded as the social science with the most universally accepted core principles. A discipline with a centralized knowledge structure may be able to foster a closer connection to the research mainstream than more fragmented disciplines.

However, we are not persuaded this is the case. Analysts of economic textbooks have also noted the slippage between what contemporary economists do and the content of the introductory books (see for example *Journal of Economics Education* 1988). As Colander (2004, p. 121) puts it, “principles textbooks do not have a good image among serious economists; they generally believe that texts reduce economists’ profound thoughts into oversimplified models and maxims that reflect yesterday’s ideas”. The study of dynamic processes and the integration of theory and data using sophisticated mathematical modeling has revolutionized both micro and macroeconomics, but economics textbook observers find little evidence that such insights are reflected in the first semester principles textbooks (*e.g.* Colander 2005). While a higher share of economics principles textbooks are authored by prominent researchers, several of the best-selling texts are also authored by scholars not known for their research.<sup>11</sup> Sociology as a discipline may not be as unified as others (Leavitt and Nass 1989), but the kinds of issues raised by critics of economics textbooks suggest that the textbooks of even the paradigmatic unified social science faces similar kinds of constraints.

<sup>11</sup> Details available upon request.

The possibility that contemporary American sociology has some particular features relative to other national sociologies that might account for the persistence of the paradigm model is worth considering. In particular, American sociology has largely rejected all forms of “grand theory”, but this very rejection may, paradoxically, open the door to the persistence of older theoretical paradigms that were simply never replaced (this possibility has been intriguingly raised in regard to the state of social theory in America by Joas and Knobl 2009 [2004], p. 199). Mainstream American sociology began to move away from grand theory about the same time in the 1970s that functionalism and conflict theory both blew up in the face of disciplinary turmoil. In addition, the more recent work of Europeans such as Bourdieu, Luhmann, and Habermas has simply not had as strong a presence in the United States as elsewhere. Textbook authors adhere to the older representations of the theoretical core because they work in a larger context where theory has not evolved in the same way as it has in Europe.

Some evidence for this has come through in our interviews. For example, a number of authors answered the question of why this presentation of social theory persists in the books by asking us, what was the alternative? Others postulated that functionalism/conflict/symbolic interactionism are indeed still the heart of theoretical ideas in sociology. But such responses were provided by a relative minority of our interviewees; most expressed disdain for this representation of theory in one way or another *even* while continuing to employ it in their books. Here is how one author put it:

If I had my druthers in doing a textbook and not have to respond to the market, I would eliminate entirely the functionalism, conflict, theory, symbolic interaction trinity that you find in every textbook. I just don't think it makes any sense to deal with it that way [...] But it is so expensive and time consuming to produce a textbook that nobody wants to venture too far out of the tried and true (Author Interview L).

### *Demand side factors: inequality in American higher education*

If market factors influence textbooks in terms of how they are prepared, there are also some important demand-side dynamics that shape the textbook presentation of sociology. Critical to understanding the overall demand-side context is the structure of American higher education, and just how wide the “bottom of the iceberg” really is. Where is sociology taught in America? While virtually every college and university, and an increasing number of high schools as well, have

courses and major programs in sociology, there is a significant chasm between the sociology taught at the leading research universities and liberal arts colleges from that taught in the “mass” institutions.

How do the size of these relative sectors match up with one another? In 2007, there were 9.8 million full-time undergraduate students enrolled in American higher education, four-fifths of whom were enrolled in public universities.<sup>12</sup> While some of these public institutions have graduate programs in sociology, the vast majority do not. Among smaller private institutions, academic standards are generally higher on average, but textbook usage in these institutions is relatively low (except in the rapidly growing for-profit schools such as the University of Phoenix, which now enroll about 7 % of all U.S. college students). Finally, about half of all students are enrolled in two-year (or community) colleges, where standards are frequently significantly below that of 4-year schools. The latter, combined with the bottom tiers of the four-year institutions, constitute the heart of the market for textbook sociology.

Data from the federal government’s National Center for Education Statistics suggest both that the bottom of the iceberg is wide and that the gap between the top and bottom is also large. While there is only a limited amount of detailed information available about the educational backgrounds and preferences of instructors at community colleges and the larger teaching colleges, there is ample anecdotal evidence that they have few incentives or opportunities to remain connected to the research mainstream of American sociology. For example, only 25 % of the social science instructors in American community colleges (the two-year institutions that combine both vocational education with general education tracks that prepare students to transfer to four-year bachelor’s degree-granting institutions) have PhDs, and just 13 % overall.

Beyond the degree status of community college instructors, other anecdotal evidence suggests that instructors at these institutions, and the four-year public universities that do not support faculty research, have few incentives to remain connected to professional sociology. To be sure, the PhD has long been a near-universal requirement for employment as a tenure-track faculty member at four-year BA-granting institutions. Yet many of the faculty at these schools do relatively little original research or writing for scholarly publication, and a long-term

<sup>12</sup> All of the data in this section come from the website of the National Center for Educational Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov/>).

trend of hiring poorly paid part-time and adjunct faculty exacerbates this tendency away from the disciplinary mainstream.

This has a somewhat subtle implication for textbook content. First, while there are a handful of texts aimed at the upper-end of the university system, in the more high status universities textbooks are generally not used, and often even frowned upon. Faculty in these institutions teach introductory sociology with a mix of monographs and articles. Since the upper-tier is small and often resistant to textbook use, profit-seeking publishers will generally seek to produce books that will appeal to instructors in the middle and bottom of the system. (Note that it is the preferences of the instructors that matters; several of our interviewees joked that textbooks were like dog food, in that the ultimate consumer – the student reader – did not get to choose what they consume.)

*Demand side: benefits of the paradigm model?*

One final demand side factor came up in a number of our interviews. It was not something we had not anticipated, but it plausibly suggests a possible type of American exceptionalism in sociology instruction that might motivate the persistence of the paradigm model. Several authors and editors defended the functionalism/conflict/interactionism triad by highlighting its *pedagogical* attractions. Conflict theory may persist, as a few authors suggested, because it provides a more “balanced” way of presenting radical sociological views to an undergraduate audience:

My personal opinion about that [conflict theory] is that to some extent that was a strategy adopted by people who had more sympathy to Marx than Weber to try to make it seem like they weren't just “Marxists” so they kind of broadened their base and look more respectable [Author Interview C].

Wood (1983, p. 463) suggested a similar interpretation from the left. He notes that while “in the last few years there has been a welcome shift in sociology texts [...] away from the pretension of paradigm unity to a recognition – and sometimes embrace – of paradigm diversity in the field”, this has been created by “by collapsing Marxism, the major critical alternative paradigm, into an ultimately meaningless category: that of conflict theory”. The perceived hostility of a mass audience in the United States to anything that sounds too “Marxist” may encourage textbook publishers to push authors to find vaguer and more neutral-sounding labels to package the same ideas under the “conflict theory” label.

A second unanticipated benefit of the paradigm model is that it creates a sense of intellectual controversy and debate. This is perceived by a number of authors and editors as another virtue of the functionalism/conflict framing (Friedman 1991). An editor told us that the functionalism/conflict dichotomy persists

because it's actually kind of a convenient paradigm for teaching the course. Frequently introductory sociology books will have a disclaimer that looking at functionalism on the one hand and conflict on the other is not the same as looking at conservatives and liberals, but it works very well [...] Conservatives can look at things and say that it's just part of God's big plan – the reason that you have poor people is so that you'll have someone to rake your yard [Editor Interview].

The paradigm model may thus persist simply because, for at least some adopters (and the editors who review their reports), it serves a useful purpose of “balancing” perspectives in the classroom. Providing a way to “teach the conflicts” fits emerging pedagogical models highlighting a sense of drama that conflicts present to otherwise abstract theoretical positions (cf. Graff 1993). That said, however, it remains unclear why this *particular* framing of disciplinary dissensus should provide the dominant model for doing so.

Finally, some authors noted that the standard model had become such a staple of textbook writing as to create an extreme form of path-dependence, the “lock-in”. In this view, market considerations overwhelm any attempt to remove the standard framework:

If I had my druthers in doing a textbook and not have to respond to the market, I would eliminate entirely the functionalism, conflict, theory, symbolic interaction trinity that you find in every textbook. I just don't think it makes any sense to deal with it that way [...] But it is so expensive and time consuming to produce a textbook that nobody wants to venture too far out of the tried and true [Author Interview I].

Such extreme formulations of a lock-in model of textbook content, however, were not universally shared by all authors and, at least with respect to introducing the theoretical core of the discipline, the newest books have moved away from the traditional model.

### *Conclusion*

Textbooks are unique forms of disciplinary knowledge. Their production differs substantially from other kinds of scholarly writing. We have endeavored here to go beyond content analysis of textbooks

to account for the embedded character of some of those ideas in these texts. Textbook ideas persist long after they disappear from the disciplinary mainstream because of both supply-side and demand-side market forces that the system creates. Zeroing in on one particularly egregious example of persistence – the structural functionalism/conflict theory/symbolic interactionism paradigm model found in almost all American introductory textbooks from the late 1970s up to the present – suggests how both types of market forces interact to discourage more vibrant content.

On the supply side, publishers exert some pressure to conform to certain kinds of textbook norms that are “tried and true”. They employ various devices to inform authors of “what the market wants,” and encourage authors to find ways to conform by helping to write the book. The decline of new books, as the costs of launching textbooks has risen, combined with the pressure to keep key content from one edition of an existing book to another, further encourages stability. Until recently most of the best-selling textbooks have been written by scholars teaching in non-elite institutions known primarily as textbook writers. A surprising proportion of textbook authors do indeed appear to believe in and embrace the theories identified in their books (especially symbolic interactionism) that are part of the standard theoretical framing. Finally, the decline of “grand theory” in sociology has left the discipline without guiding dominant models, leaving the door open for the persistence of older images of the disciplinary core.

On the demand side, American sociology textbooks are produced in the context of a system of higher education that has until very recently led the world in terms of numbers of students enrolled, while at the same time exhibiting a high degree of inequality. That system has far more “slots” at the bottom than the top, in an overall context of sharp inequalities between different institutions within the system. Heavy teaching loads at the bottom taught by sometimes poorly trained faculty encourages routinization of instruction, and publishers respond to this routinization with a reluctance to challenge it. When instructors have established teaching routines built around the “structural functionalism” *versus* “conflict theory” debate, these can persist year after year simply because that is how they have been taught in the past.

These findings have implications for pedagogy, and a few speculative comments are in order. The global growth of higher education is increasing the demand for introductory textbooks everywhere. But if our conclusions are correct, how these pressures play out in other national contexts – and how important market forces will be – will

depend heavily on how much inequality is found in the educational system. The proliferation of second-tier teaching colleges in America, with sometimes poorly trained faculty, is not found everywhere else. In particular, continental European systems of higher education have generally maintained much greater degrees of equality, and higher standards across the board, than is found in U.S. higher education (with the other Anglo-American countries somewhere between the U.S. and Europe). As a consequence, the textbook does not play the same role in European sociology as in the U.S. But as higher education grows in inegalitarian parts of the global South, many of the same dynamics as in the U.S. are likely to be reproduced there. Nor can the possibility of American influence on textbooks produced elsewhere be entirely discounted either (*e.g.* Pereyra 2008, Platt 2008b). In the world of textbook publishing, as with so many other arenas of social life, inequality in one location can produce important consequences elsewhere.

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### Résumé

Il est bien connu que les manuels pour étudiants transmettent toujours une vue des idées dominantes en retrait par rapport au front de la science. Cependant les facteurs causaux ont été peu étudiés. Si l'on prend le cas de la sociologie aux États-Unis sur la période 1998-2004, on voit que le structuro-fonctionnalisme, théorie du conflit, et interactionnisme symbolique sont présents comme s'ils constituaient encore l'essentiel du corpus théorique de la discipline. Une enquête sur et auprès des auteurs comme des maisons d'édition fait apparaître certains éléments d'explication tant du côté de la demande que de l'offre.

*Mots clés:* Introduction à la sociologie, Théorie sociologique, Pédagogie de la sociologie

### Zusammenfassung

Wie bekannt, vermitteln Schulbücher Wissen gängiger Ideen und stehen der Wissenschaft hinten an. Die kausalen Gründe für diesen Sachverhalt sind wenig untersucht. Zwischen 1998-2004 wird die Soziologie in den USA noch als struktureller Funktionalismus, als Konflikttheorie und symbolischer Interaktionismus dargestellt, gerade so als wären sie noch Hauptbestandteil der soziologischen Theorie. Eine Untersuchung sowohl der Autoren als auch der Verlage weist einige Elemente auf, die mit Angebot und Nachfrage erklärt werden können.

*Schlagwörter:* Einführung in die Soziologie, Soziologietheorie, Soziologiepädagogik

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