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Book Review

Alan How

Restoring the Classic in Sociology: Traditions, Texts and the Canon. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. 260 pp. ISBN 978023013261.

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David Inglis (2014) has been critical of the trend towards ‘presentism’ in contemporary British sociology. For him, sociology tends to be ‘historically ignorant’ and ‘panders to the self-conceptions of the period it exists in, flattering its contemporaries with the pleasing illusion that they are somehow completely unique, and that their thoughts and actions are wholly historically unprecedented’ (Inglis 2014:114). It is this tendency, sociology’s ‘antipathy to the past’, which How confronts in this thought-provoking and valuable book. In doing so, he presents an innovative and valuable approach to ‘classicality’ and its relation to tradition and the canon. As he puts it for a classic to be a classic ‘it must challenge the self-importance of the present and show much it has in common with the past’ (pp. 3-4). How convincingly draws upon perspectives not common to the debate on the classics, most notably the work of Gadamer, to make his case. While it is a rewarding read the book does leave somewhat unanswered how to take forward its central argument, most notably in the choices many of us make in terms of whether to teach ‘classics’ or ‘the canon’.

The book is separated into three sections, the first, ‘The Issue of the Classic’, details what How sees as an inhospitable environment for the classics. In the Introduction he highlights poststructuralist and postmodernist attacks on the notion of society and the subject. Here, the classics become historic artefacts of how ‘society’ was imagined, rather than useful resources for a world at the ‘end of society’. Meanwhile, by dissolving the subject, then ‘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’ (p. 8). As we shall see, awareness of the reader is a central, and distinctive, part of How’s wider argument.

The second chapter, ‘The Sense of an Ending’, turns to the debate on the classics within sociology. Here How draws out two perspectives, the ‘externalist’ and ‘internalist’. For the

‘externalist’, for example Connell (1997), texts become classical since they gain approval from the environment of which they are part. This can bring with it the issues of which voices come to be recognised and their ‘white dead men’ nature. The ‘internalist’ position, such as in Collins’ (1997) response to Connell, ascribes classicity to the qualities of the text itself. It is a ‘classic’ in the sense of being an ‘exemplar’. While How doesn’t ascribe to either position in this debate and, as we shall see below, is critical of both, at this point his more marked criticisms are for the externalists. Most notably, he argues their solution, to expand the canon, is not a solution at all since every new act of inclusion involves further exclusions (for example, one may ‘include’ Du Bois, but still exclude Martineau).

The second section, ‘The Wider Context: The Past, the Classic and the Identity of Sociology’, concerns the nature of sociology today and its aforementioned ‘antipathy to the past’. For How, there are three factors which have created this relation to history. Firstly, what he terms in chapter 3 the ‘humanist’ and ‘scientific’ splits in sociology have tended to marginalise the past either in the desire to move forward knowledge, or in by moving closer to cultural studies. This move towards cultural studies, as argued in chapter 5, has – along with the emergence of postmodernism – left sociology without a clear disciplinary identity and, in turn, has lessened the basis for a common sociological heritage emerging from classical texts.

While contemporary trends may have exacerbated this antagonistic relation to the past How sees it as foundational to the sociological project, as argued in chapter 4. This manifests itself in the rejection of one concept in particular: tradition. The Enlightenment and progressive movements such as Marxism see tradition as something to be overcome; we must be freed from tradition in order to achieve emancipation. This is then continued in perspectives such as critical theory, functionalism and interpretivism but reaches its apotheosis in the ‘detraditionalisation’ theories defended most prominently by Beck and Giddens.

This then leads How, in chapter 6, to ‘rethink tradition’. His key claim is that tradition ‘is not something passively received from the past, but something interpreted as part of an active life process’ (p. 111), it is more akin to a gift from the past than a burden to be overcome. As a gift, its reciprocity lies in the reinterpretation of tradition. For example, instead of seeing the British royal family as an example of invented tradition it is, for How, more accurate to see them undergoing a continual process of ‘retraditionalisation’ in which different meanings and

ideas get attached to them. Consequently, rather than see tradition as something limiting agency, How, drawing upon Ravission and Merleau-Ponty, argues it provides the common cultural knowledge and habits which enable agency to take place.

This is then central to how we should imagine the role of the classics. Sociology, as has been noted by others (Anderson et al. 1985), is an ‘argument subject’ in which, for How, disagreements are ‘are not usually resolved through facts, but rather through discursive debate’ (p. 137). But, and How acknowledges his debt to Alexander’s (1987) view of the classics on this point, for this debate to take place we require the development of sociological ‘know-how’ which creates some common, shared, understanding of what the other participants in the debate are claiming. Here, How turns to the value of the classics as texts that are *read*. By practising this ‘know-how’ one demonstrates that they have engaged in a skilful reading of the classics and, in addition to developing that baseline of common sociological knowledge, indicates their abilities as a critical reader. At this point I did find myself wondering if this reflected the nature of what sociology as a discipline is. While I use the term differently from how it is used in audits of academia (Holmwood 2010) it would be fair to term sociology, at least in Britain today, an ‘importer’ discipline in which a significant number of sociologists may have only done their PhD, if that, in the discipline, following taught courses elsewhere. Given this, one is left to ask if, for this group of scholars, a common set of classics are actually read – or, indeed, whether those who did study sociology ever ‘read’ more than the extracts they were required to – as opposed to their key claims being absorbed by engagement in the field. I will return to this below when I discuss how How’s book leaves the parameters of the ‘classic’ open to debate.

This then brings us to the final section of the book ‘Hermeneutics, Tradition, Classic and Canon’. Having established the importance of tradition to his argument How then devotes the next two chapters to the exposition and evaluation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. In chapter 7 he outlines the position of hermeneutics as both understanding and as giving meaning. These processes are impossible outside of history and its resulting traditions. This is why Gadamer’s notions of the hermeneutic circle, in which understanding is part of an ongoing process, and the ‘horizon’, which both limits and expands what we can see at a particular point in that circle are valuable. This perspective indicates that:

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, 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 (p. 167)

Therefore, from a hermeneutical position, the value of a sociological classic rests not upon its direct empirical validity for the current day – for example, whether the correlations Durkheim drew between levels of suicide are still valid – but whether ‘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’ (p. 198). Therefore, by recognising some notion of shared tradition classics question claims which prioritise ‘newness’ and the ‘omnipotence of the present’ (p. 204).

As detailed in chapter 8, this then creates a very particular meaning of what counts as a ‘classic’; as How puts it earlier in the book a ‘classic’ is not an ever-lasting element of a text but rather ‘the classic must prove itself over and over against in the arena of intellectual discussions’ (p. 23). Following Gadamer, texts come to be classics either on the basis of their ‘eminence’ (their position as an exemplar of the field) and/or ‘historicity’ (the ability to speak to this shared history). This is then a judgement which changes with time. The example How draws upon is Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*. In an earlier period while still being taught, this was seen as indicative of a problematic positivist position. But, with the emergence of a ‘new’ cultural understanding of Durkheim (Smith and Alexander 2005), it has gained in its eminence and historicity as a text able to speak to contemporary concerns with culture and the sociology of the body.

As detailed in chapter 9, we might be able to speak of *Elementary Forms* as a text which has always been part of the ‘canon’, but only recently has become a ‘classic’. For How, many self-proclaimed critiques of the classics, of both the internalist and externalist positions, are actually critiques of the canon. The canon, for How is a collection of works which are ‘given the common authority to represent what a discipline believes about itself’ and selections are made ‘to meet the needs of the discipline as it defines itself in a particular way at a particular time’ (p. 239). Therefore, a text can be part of the canon, but not be a classic. It can be taught to show what sociology *once was* but *no longer is*, as was once the case with

Elementary Forms and may now be the case with a text such as *The Social System* or *Middletown*. As How puts it ‘a canon does not a classic make’. But, in turn, a classic may not be part of the canon. The work of Simmel may be identified as a classic but not be given the same position in the canon as Marx, Durkheim or Weber.

This then leads to two significant points from How, firstly, unlike a religious canon which tends to close around one particular position, a sociological canon is open and partly defined by the different approaches of the scholars therein. Secondly, it means a ‘classic’ is judged by criteria separate from inclusion in the canon.

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... 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 (pp. 234-235)

How concludes his text by highlighting that while we need to be aware of the systemic inequalities in the canon we also need to be aware both that a canon, of some form, is inevitable for an academic discipline and that those works included within it should not, automatically, be given the status of a ‘classic’. This must be earned.

As already mentioned, this is a thought-provoking read. There are three, interconnected, virtues of the text which I would like to highlight here. Firstly, one major value of How’s approach is that it focuses on classics as things that are *read* and that, in turn, have *readers*. Sometimes discussion of the classics tends to treat their ideas as disembodied entities which are effectively absorbed via osmosis within the sociological field. But, as How continually reminds us, we gain true appreciation of classics through reading them; attempts to remove a knowing subject can have the unintended consequence of marginalising the knowledgeable reader. Secondly, How provides a useful basis upon which we can identify a certain *je ne sais quoi* which often marks out the classic. Anyone reading what they identify as a classic will have had the moment where, as How puts it, a light is ‘shone on something that was previously opaque’ and which causes us to admire the ‘sudden clarity that flows from the insight such authors bequeath us’ (p. 12). For How, we can theorise that feeling as reckoning with our shared tradition and creating a ‘resource for an enlightenment that is not abstract or

transcendental, but concretely ours' (p. 198); in short, it is both their position within the Gadamerian horizons of the past and the present which make classics so valuable. Finally, How's separation of the classic and the canon is a fruitful separation for further thinking and, in doing so, forces us to reckon with our defence of the classics beyond their inclusion in the canon. As How puts it, to defend to classics as 'important merely because it is canonical is as dubious as art being significant because it is pretty' (p. 159).

Nevertheless, it was exactly this separation of the classic and the canon which left me with unanswered questions. There are two elements of this flowing from How's argument. Firstly, is it really true that we cannot 'make' a classic? While I theoretically appreciate the separation How makes it I fear that empirically it is not so neat. Let's use his example of *The Elementary Forms*. While it is possible to suggest that for a certain period of time this was canonical but not classic, taught as an example of what not to do, it is surely also the case that its continued presence in the canon made its (re)entry into the category of classic more plausible? To stick with sociologists active in France the removal, or non-admittance into, the sociological canon of writers such as Comte, Saint-Simon, de Staël, LePlay, Tarde, Van Gennep and Halbwachs made their status of 'classic' much harder to achieve, whether they are worthy of it or not. Therefore, the somewhat overly neat distinction How makes between the canon and the classic can be questioned. It is at the very least possible to claim that being canonical helps make a text classical. Secondly, how do we determine when something has moved into the stage of the classic? It seems here the fractured nature of sociology may be a major influence. From the list of above names we may claim Tarde now does have the status of a classic due to his influence on actor-network approaches. But, outside of this, one would suspect Tarde's reach is still extremely limited. Does this limited, but deep, reach make Tarde a 'classic' in the same way as Simmel, whose reach is perhaps broader across sociology but shallower? To use How's language above, how many sociologists need to be involved in the 'portals of discussion'? How comprehensive does the 'provisional consensus' need to be? And so on.

Aside from these questions, I couldn't help but leave this book wondering what it mean for sociologists who not only research but teach classical social theory. How highlights early on (pp. 4-5) that one of the inspirations for writing the text was requests from his students to justify his teaching of classical writers. This is a request which I suspect many who read How's book will, quite rightly, have had made of them. But, perhaps one lesson of How's

book is that there is two ways to approach teaching classical social theory and the process of inclusion and exclusion this entails. One way is to recognise one is teaching the canon, texts which help police the perimeters of 'sociology' and present students with the variety of ways this can, and cannot, be done. While this seems plausible it also seems the course could become a philosophy of science or intellectual history offering. While, of course, these are important and hold interest it would seem to limit the potential for what, as How correctly points out, we all gain from reading classic texts: that sudden moment where things previously opaque about the social world become clear. So, the second option would be to set out to teach classics, conscious in the fact they may differ from the canon. But, here we face the same contradiction as above; what if, given my interests I feel that Tarde is a greater classic than Durkheim? Or, I had a greater bolt of recognition from reading Martineau rather than Weber? Would a course of these 'non-canonical' but (potentially) classical thinkers be as valuable and/or be recognised as such?

It is to the credit of How's approach that he does not set out to police the boundaries of what counts as a 'classic' but rather to identify the processes which underpin a text's classicity. In doing so, How raises questions as to how we determine what exactly fits into this category which go beyond the reach of this interesting book. I hope though that those tasked with teaching the classics share his view that they should not be 'rote-learnt', but rather be read and appreciated in a sophisticated way (p. 137).

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