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Citation: Walby, S. (2021). Sociology: Fragmentation or reinvigorated synthesis?. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 21(3-4), pp. 323-333. doi: 10.1177/1468795X211042969

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Sociology: Fragmentation or reinvigorated synthesis?

Journal of Classical Sociology

2021, Vol. 21(3-4) 323–333

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DOI: 10.1177/1468795X211042969

journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs**Sylvia Walby** 

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Abstract

Does the discipline of Sociology need to be defended from fragmentation by the mobilisation of a canon derived from its classical legacy? The paper provides an exposition of the arguments of Turner, Susen and O'Neill concerning fragmentation of Sociology as a discipline. It investigates whether there is fragmentation or reinvigorated synthesis in three examples: inequality beyond class, posthumanism and postmodernism. It draws on a reading of contemporary theoretical developments in Sociology. It concludes that the classical legacy is important and that engagement with external forces has reinvigorated rather than fragmented the discipline.

Keywords

Classics, discipline, fragmentation, impact, REF, sociology, synthesis

Introduction

Does the discipline of Sociology need to be defended from fragmentation by the mobilisation of a canon derived from its classical legacy?

Susen and Turner (2011, 2021) and O'Neill and Turner (2001) in their contributions to introductory and anniversary reviews of the *Journal of Classical Sociology* suggest that the academic discipline of Sociology is fragmenting and needs to be defended by mobilising the classical legacy. They argue that Sociology is losing its core, being hollowed out by fashionable themes associated with identity politics and the cultural turn, with little cumulative development of knowledge. They propose that the best way to defend the discipline of Sociology is by excavating and mobilising the classical legacy, associated with Marx, Weber and Durkheim.

I agree with Turner, Susen and O'Neill on the significance of the core and the classics. Many of the conceptual issues introduced by the classical legacy of Sociology continue to be relevant today. The concepts of society and of the social are powerful in the explanation of important phenomena of contemporary interest. The issue of

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macro-level change, connected to meso level institutional changes and micro level lived experience remains relevant. The issues of social change, of the relationship between the local, national and global, remain. The relationship of social inequality to democracy and social problems remains. The continual reinterpretation of the classical legacy contributes to the theoretical development of the discipline, helping cumulative advancements in knowledge reducing repetitive enquiries into previously researched issues.

I disagree with Turner, Susen and O'Neill that Sociology is fragmenting. The responses to challenges to orthodox interpretations of Marx, Weber and Durkheim are productive for the vitality and sustainability of the discipline of Sociology. Engagement with the challenges, concerning multiple inequalities in addition to class, posthumanism and postmodernism has changed the discipline but not led to abandonment of its core. There are both intellectual and organisational reasons why the discipline of Sociology is not fragmenting.

Some of the topics within contemporary Sociology, about which Turner, Susen and O'Neill express regret, constitute significant sites of disciplinary development. These include: responding to external changes in society, multiple inequalities beyond class, including feminism and postcolonialism; posthumanism and the rethinking of the relationship of the social to technology, bodies and nature; postmodernism and the nature of explanation, including the concept of systems. There are challenges and centrifugal forces; but there have also been multiple waves of synthesis and resynthesis (Baert and da Silva, 2010; Giddens, 1984; López and Scott, 2000; Walby, 2009; Wallerstein, 1974) that are informed by the classical legacy. In parallel, integration is supported by organisational developments at national and international levels.

These discussions on the development of the discipline of Sociology, are informed by wider debates concerning social science, academic disciplines and science. They concern the nature of paradigm competition and paradigm change (Kuhn, 1979); the competition between academic disciplines for remit and resources (Abbott, 2001); the nature of scientific work (Latour, 2005); the nature of explanation and ontology in the social sciences (Scoones et al., 2020); the tension between universal and standpoint epistemologies (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2007; Turner, 2021); and the implications of changes in methodology and available data (Burnap et al., 2014; Carrabine, 2012; Lury, 2020; Marres, 2017; Stanley, 2016).

This paper

The paper explicates Turner, Susen and O'Neill's arguments articulated in the three editorials of the anniversary issues concerning fragmentation of the discipline and the value of its classical legacy. These are important arguments that deserve consideration. The paper selects three key examples of sites of fragmentation for sustained attention: inequality beyond class, posthumanism and postmodernism. Taking each in turn, it considers the extent to which analysis of these topics has generated fragmentation or resynthesis within sociology. The paper discusses organisational changes and their implications for fragmentation and cohesiveness of the discipline, drawing on a reading of contemporary developments in Sociology.

Fragmentation?

Turner, Susen and O'Neill (O'Neill and Turner, 2001; Susen and Turner, 2011, 2021) have argued for two decades that the discipline of Sociology is fragmenting with detrimental consequences for the discipline. They identify a core of Sociology which needs defending. They argue that defending the discipline against fragmentation requires mobilisation of the classical legacy.

Turner, Susen and O'Neill (O'Neill and Turner, 2001; Susen and Turner, 2011, 2021) argue that because of fragmentation, Sociology lacks accumulation of research findings.

In the twentieth century, academic sociology was fragmented by various theoretical traditions and a variety of methodological practices. It was also fractured by numerous ideological battles and diverse national perspectives. The discipline of sociology has often been strangely lacking in any sense of cumulative theory or research findings (O'Neill and Turner, 2001: 5-6).

sociology is currently exposed to an exceptional degree of fragmentation. Such a fragmentation process threatens to undermine sociology as a coherent discipline. . . . Sociology appears to be more exposed or prone to intellectual fashion than any other discipline in the social sciences (Susen and Turner, 2011: 9).

They suggest that external factors are a possible explanation of this fragmentation, and that Sociology is more open to influence by external factors than other disciplines. They regret the influence of external factors.

By the late 1960s, the functionalist paradigm was breaking down. For the next half century, there was a war of paradigms, with little agreement on 'the right' explanatory frameworks and problems. . . . questions about personal identity, especially sexual identity, replacing (or at least sidelining) the macro-sociology of social structures. . . . One explanation of this 'war of paradigms' is that sociology, probably more than most disciplines in the social sciences, is constantly influenced by external factors ... including social movements (Susen and Turner, 2021: 230–231).

"the hollowing out of sociology" by the emergence of journals catering to cultural studies, feminism, the study of the body, film studies and so forth. To put it bluntly, contemporary sociology is increasingly "decorative" (Rojek and Turner, 2000), focusing on "identity studies"(Susen and Turner, 2021: 231).

They suggest that these trends towards fragmentation are greater than in other disciplines as because sociology is more open to influence from non-academic sources. They include in particular feminism and postmodernism, and also reference postcolonialism and posthumanism.

[S]ociology, probably more than most disciplines in the social sciences, is constantly influenced by external factors. To be precise, it is influenced by *constantly changing* social factors, including social movements. One obvious example of this constellation is the impact of feminism on sociology curricula. The key figures and prevailing concerns of the classical

tradition have been criticized by a large proportion of feminist writers, who point to domination by ('white', 'Western', 'middle-class' – in short privileged) men and their 'power-laden interests' (Susen and Turner, 2021: 231).

it is hard to deny that modern sociology is driven by intellectual fashions – which often come from literary traditions, from cultural studies or film studies. The impact of postmodernism on the social sciences is a primary example (Susen, 2015, 2016). The history of popular journals such as *Theory, Culture & Society* might be taken as an illustration of these trends and developments, at least in British sociology (Susen and Turner, 2021: 231).

Turner, Susen and O'Neill identify core issues in the discipline of sociology derived from and found in the classical legacy. They acknowledge that this is a contested claim.

The core issues of the discipline of Sociology are defined:

Sociology is the study of social institutions that are shaped by the dialectical tension between solidarity and scarcity. It has been classically concerned with the problem of social order, and with the destructive impact of capitalist markets. It has addressed the tensions between liberal democracy and the inequalities of social stratification. It has been concerned to understand the rituals that sustain a common culture. It has been fascinated by the civilities that make everyday social life possible (O'Neill and Turner, 2001: 7).

They centre the classical legacy on Marx, Weber and Durkheim, sometimes extending this earlier in time to Comte and later to Parsons, sometimes additionally naming other sociologists, including Simmel.

Turner, Susen and O'Neill have identified several challenges to the coherence of Sociology as a discipline, which they define as a set of core issues based on their interpretation of the classical legacy. Examples of these concern: inequalities beyond class, posthumanism and postmodernism.

Reinvigorated synthesis?

All disciplines are influenced by 'external factors', as noted by Turner, Susen and O'Neill. The challenges are not unique to Sociology; but shared by many sciences. The tendency towards fragmentation in response to non-academic developments is counteracted by tendencies to synthesise to create new forms of coherence. Both intellectual and organisational practices of self-organisation by the discipline contribute to reinvigorated synthesis. When these forces respond successfully, knowledge progresses in ways that are relevant to society. The impact of society on sociology and the impact of sociology on society should be embraced, not regretted. 'Public Sociology' (Burawoy, 2005), for example, is a positive development. The debates that result from the impact of external factors are important in the testing and improvement of core theoretical constructs. They are leading to cumulative improvement in knowledge, albeit in a highly uneven, rather than gradual pattern.

There are multiple ways to produce synthesis between different approaches (Baert and da Silva, 2010). Each has a different inflection and purpose, attempting to unite different types of intellectual traditions. Overall, they have produced significant counter-tendencies to fragmentation. The engagement with the classical legacy over these issues

is productive not destructive for sociology. Three examples of synthesis are identified here. Extending the theorisation of inequality in response to challenges from feminism to include gender, of anti-racism to include ethnicity, and post-colonialism to include the global are positive developments. Addressing posthumanism to analyse the intersection of the social with nature, technology and bodies, while maintaining concepts of society and the social is positive. Addressing and resolving the challenges of postmodernism to traditional forms of macro-level explanation advance the discipline.

Multiple inequalities beyond class: Intersectionality

Inequality is a core issue for sociology. It is recognised in the classics, though more through the legacy of Marx and Weber than Durkheim. They underestimated, but did not exclude, the significance of non-class forms of inequality. Gender, ethnicity and colonialism are forms of inequality that are and should be within the core of Sociology. The challenges from feminism, anti-racism and anti-colonialism have led to significant developments in sociological theory. Further, there is the development of a field of theory specifically concerned with the intersection of these inequalities, 'intersectionality'.

Within the Marxist tradition, the analysis of gender was early addressed by Engels as reproduction, by Gilman in the context of economics, and Schreiner in the context of empire (Stanley, 2002) and continues to thrive (Dunaway, 2014; Gottfried, 2013; Mies, 1986; Shire and Nemoto, 2020); gender was not first introduced into sociology in the cultural turn. Building on earlier analyses, the range of forms of gender inequalities has been extended, for example, to include violence (Anitha, 2011) and sexuality (Richardson, 2017). The Weberian tradition has contributed to the conceptualisation of ethnicity and religion (Hayes 2015). The work of Dubois (1903) stands out. The analyses of inequality include multiple forms, including age (Furlong et al., 2018; Mizen, 2003). The multiple forms of synthesis of the Marxist and Weberian legacies have generated several flourishing schools of research. One example is Wallerstein's world systems theory, that theorises the exploitation by capital in the metropolitan north of the global periphery or south (Chase-Dunn, 1988; Wallerstein, 1974). The analysis of the racialisation of this exploitation has vibrant intellectual history and contemporary expression (Bhambra, 2007; Virdee, 2019) at multiple levels of abstraction (Neal et al., 2017). The analysis of gender, ethnicity and the postcolonial has not been at the expense of analysis of class, from its articulation in neoliberalism (Gane, 2014) to the analysis of crime (Hall and Winlow, 2015). The intersection of gender, race and class has itself been a subject of analysis (Collins and Bilge, 2020; Walby et al., 2012).

The issues raised by feminism, anti-racism, postcolonialism and other inequalities beyond class are not a distraction from core sociological issues, but central; and they were already in the classical legacy; and developed since. The outside influences of feminism, anti-racism and anti-colonialism are productive for Sociology. In turn, Sociology has potential impact on these issues of multiple inequalities.

Posthumanism

While the concepts of society and the social are core to Sociology, addressing their engagement with technology, nature and bodies is important to address the contemporary

world. There are debates, aligned with those within the classical legacy, on differences in approach to the relationship of the social and non-social. The Durkheimian tradition narrowly focused on the social alone, indeed perhaps ‘purification’, as part of its strategy for the development of Sociology as a discipline. By contrast, but also within the classical legacy, Marx included nature and technology as the forces of production, which, jointly with the relations of production, made up his core concept of the mode of production.

The ‘pure’ focus on the social, as derived from the Durkheimian school, was a defensive move against other disciplines, seeking to identify a distinctive terrain for analysis by the emerging discipline. However, while the identification of a distinctive terrain has its place in the development of the discipline, in relation to the issues of technology, nature and bodies, this approach to purify the social might be regarded as a failed, or perhaps excessive, strategy.

Theoretical and empirical developments since the classics, but drawing on their concepts, have sought to include nature, technology and bodies within sociological and social theory. These include research that integrates into sociological theory the issues of science and technology (Beck, 1992; Latour, 2005); of climate change, the environment and sustainability (Scoones et al., 2020; Urry, 2011), of bodies (Turner, 1984) including their ageing and health (Carpentieri et al., 2016); and, in the current time, of COVID (Chandola et al., 2020; Delanty, 2021; Walby, 2021a). Methodologies have been extended and developed to address these issues (Burnap et al., 2014; Carrabine, 2012; Lury, 2020; Marres, 2017; Petticrew and Roberts, 2006).

Postmodernism

The challenge of postmodernism to analyses of modernity is relevant to many social science disciplines and includes multiple components. The understanding and explanation of transitions to modernity is present in the classical sociological tradition in different ways. Following Durkheim’s (1952, 1966) approach to modernity has focused on differentiation and used simple concepts of system. Following Marx, modernity is understood as double edged, involving non-linear changes and ruptures, with uneven combined effects. Following Weber (1968), there are multiple nuanced comparisons that avoid simple notions of bounded systems.

Modernity may be approached from different perspectives (Boatcă, 2015), sometimes considered as near universal (Giddens, 1984), or as taking place in stages (Beck, 1992), or taking multiple forms (Eisenstadt, 2002; Walby, 2009), generating productive debate (Schmidt, 2010). In addressing the postmodern critique of modernity, Sociology has increasingly developed analyses of multiple modernities, rather than a single universal form.

The postmodern critique has been aligned with the notion of plural epistemological positions, for example, those associated with the South (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2007) and with women (Harding, 1986), generating productive debate (McLennan, 2013; Walby, 2001). This is further associated with concern for multiple intersecting inequalities, addressed earlier.

The concept of system used in early sociology, especially the Durkheimian tradition, has had difficulty in flexing to encompass the range of issues required to address the

postmodern challenge. In response, the concept of system has been developed, drawing on complex systems thinking in other sciences (Castellani and Hafferty, 2009; Walby, 2007, 2021b). The challenge of postmodernism to Sociology varies with the different aspects of the classical legacy; it has been successfully addressed.

Organisational developments

The cohesiveness of Sociology is aided not only by intellectual synthesis but also by the practices of the professional associations that assist the organisation of disciplines.

The development of professional associations, and their associated practices of conferences and journals, supports synthesis, integration and coherence of the discipline. National associations of sociologists have been developing in many countries as well as regional associations such as the European Sociological Association, and global associations, especially the International Sociological Association. Further, national attempts to assess research quality have produced exercises that have in practice supported disciplinary identification and cohesion, including the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The UK Research Excellence Framework promotes disciplinary identification. REF has 34 Units of Assessment, which are intended to align with the main disciplines in UK Higher Education Institutions in 2021. A definition of Sociology was needed for the REF process and pragmatic agreement on a 'descriptor' of Sociology was reached through a process of consultation with professional associations in the UK. This illustrates the capacity of the discipline of Sociology to produce a coherent self-understanding. The descriptor for Sociology, Unit of Assessment 21, is as follows:

Sociology is a social science with a diversity of areas and approaches to the study of social life and society. It includes empirical, critical and theoretical study of social structures, power, cultures and everyday practices, including styles and material standards of living, opinions, values and institutions. It includes analysis of and attention to social inequalities, divisions, justice and solidarities at the micro, meso and macro levels. It covers all areas of social theory, historical and comparative studies, and social research methodology, philosophy of social science, and research on pedagogy in sociology. Sociology embraces a wide range of methodologies including quantitative, qualitative and visual; and of all forms of data. The sub-panel also expects to consider sociological research in such interdisciplinary fields as criminology and socio-legal studies, media and cultural studies, social policy, gender and women's studies, demography, socio-linguistics, social psychology, psychosocial studies, social studies of science and technology, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex studies.

The sub-panel expects submissions in this UoA from all fields of sociological enquiry including, but not restricted to, research on cultures, economies and politics; class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and age, and their intersections; religion, education, health and medicine, family, media, welfare institutions, and work and employment; environment, technology and the digital; and climate change; the body, interpersonal and inter-group relations, violence; urban and rural issues; language and social interaction; political sociology, public policy and social movements; political economy, globalisation, development, migration and diaspora; comparative studies of societies of all kinds, including work on transnational structures and agencies, Europe world systems (REF, 2019: 20).

External factors and impact

External factors challenge existing disciplines. Turner, Susen and O'Neill fear that these factors are fragmenting Sociology. However, Sociology has productively engaged with such pressures. While there are forces for fragmentation, there are also integrative forces of intellectual synthesis and professional associations. In addressing the challenges of multiple inequalities beyond class, posthumanism and postmodernism, the discipline of Sociology has significantly progressed. Reciprocally, Sociologists have impact on society, by finding ways to engage their research findings with non-academic bodies, in both civil society and government (Burawoy, 2005). Some external factors generate interest in some disciplines more than others. During moments of crisis, interest in the 'bigger picture' that sociology can provide can be more frequent (Gottfried, 2021). The pathways to achieving impact are often varied and indirect, but important, nonetheless. The closeness of the relationship between the discipline of Sociology and the non-academic world is to be celebrated rather than regretted.

Conclusions

Turner, Susen and O'Neill (O'Neill and Turner, 2001; Susen and Turner, 2011, 2021) argue for the importance of a core to the discipline of Sociology and that engagement with the classical legacy is an important contribution to its development. These arguments are well made. The *Journal of Classical Sociology* has successfully contributed to Sociological reflection on its classical legacy for two decades.

Turner, Susen and O'Neill identify external factors as leading to the greater fragmentation of Sociology than other disciplines. They have identified important sites of controversy within the discipline that result from external forces, including social movements. Three of these sites were addressed in more detail: inequalities beyond class, posthumanism and postmodernism.

My conclusion is that the engagement is not resulting in fragmentation of a level that significantly challenges the discipline. This is because of the extensive efforts at synthesis that address these issues. These intellectual efforts at synthesis are supported by organisational developments. These include national and international professional associations of sociology and their associated activities of conferences and journals. They also include assessments of research quality that have used and reinforced disciplinary coherence, such as REF.

Internal struggles and negotiations within disciplines and competition between disciplines for intellectual hegemony and resources are an endemic feature of intellectual life in Universities. The environment in which these conflicts and accommodations take place includes not only Universities, but also non-academic external factors, from social movements to funding bodies. Sociology has always been engaged with external forces. While Turner, Susen and O'Neill fear this engagement as leading to fragmentation, it is better to celebrate this engagement and the mutual impact of society and sociology on each other.

Sociology is an important part of the ecology of scientific disciplines that seek to understand the world in order to improve it. It contributes the concepts of society and

the social, which then reverberate through multiple further disciplines. Sociology has impact on society as a consequence of multiple levels of engagement with non-academic entities and its key concepts are successfully deployed in public narratives and by public agencies.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Celia Lury and Heidi Gottfried for very helpful comments.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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