

Who now reads theory?

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How Theorists Make Sweeping Claims About the Popularity of other Theorists

Claims about the popularity of this or that theorist are part of the discourse in theory handbooks, courses, and informal talk between sociologists. Parsons famously began *The Structure of Social Action* asking rhetorically, 'Who now reads Spencer?' (parsons structure 1968). Decades later, others wondered 'Who now reads Parsons?' (Bryant, 1983). A few years later, in 1988, Jeffrey Alexander would claim that it is possible that, with the exception of Habermas, no post-classical sociological theorist is more talked about today in Europe and the United States than Parsons himself (Alexander, 1988). However instructive these claims might be, sociology professors and theory professors in particular are actors in a field, and their view of the field is contingent on it. Because training in sociological theory is part of most, if not all, sociology graduate programs I thought it would be worth taking a look, through data, at how the popularity of classical and modern theorists has evolved over the last century.

Data

To illustrate how data can give us a new look into the evolution of sociological theory I handpicked a small set of theorists and journals and measured the number of papers citing them over time. As a sample of classical theorists, I take Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and W.E.B Du Bois. I selected Robert K. Merton and Talcott Parsons as representatives of the generation that established the theory canon in sociology (cite Joas here). Lastly, I selected Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Jürgen Habermas as representatives of a generation of post-functionalist theorists that aimed at developing general theoretical systems¹. I include any articles (book reviews included) published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Sociological Theory*, and *Sociology of Education*. The data comes from google

¹As with theory professor, my selection of authors and journals also reflects my position in the field. Unlike it, this selection is made explicit and can be questioned.

scholar and the code as well as the data is available here XXX².

Results

The Establishment of a Canon in Sociology

Weber, Durkheim, and Marx's popularity grew in parallel to that of those who helped to establish them as central figures in sociology. Nevertheless, the popularity of this classic trio was slower to fade away, and Weber, who resisted better the pass of time, is now the most popular of them. Du Bois, four years younger than Weber, only became popular after the turn of the millennium. In the case of Bourdieu, Giddens and Habermas we can see how these three authors, who position themselves as general theorists in the 80s had remarkably similar trends at the time, but whilst the Bourdieu's popularity skyrocketed, Habermas and Giddens slowly lost their share.

The Incorporation of Bourdieu into the Core of Sociology

Right at the peak of Parson's popularity, a future star in the field was yielding his first successes in the American scene. Pierre Bourdieu's popularity skyrocketed in the 80s, surpassing Parsons during the 90s and peaking at the time of his death in 2002. Bourdieu's success was far from homogeneous (Sociology of Education (figure available in supp materials)). Bourdieu has not only come to be the most popular theorist among this selected group, it is also a central one, as Figure 2 shows. From the 1970 onwards, Bourdieu started to gain relevance in American Sociology (cite Ollion; most journals here are American), promoted by Randall Collins analyses of the education system between others, it has, each decade, become more and more central in this network of theorists. Meanwhile Parsons has been pushed to the periphery (color Parsons in blue). Footnote: This is partially the result of their changing popularity's but it doesn't result directly from them since we could imagine a world in which Bourdieu was extremely popular, but just isolated from other theorists. Maybe some articles citing Bourdieu alone and other citing the classics. However, this is not the case, as Bourdieu is very much in the center of the network.

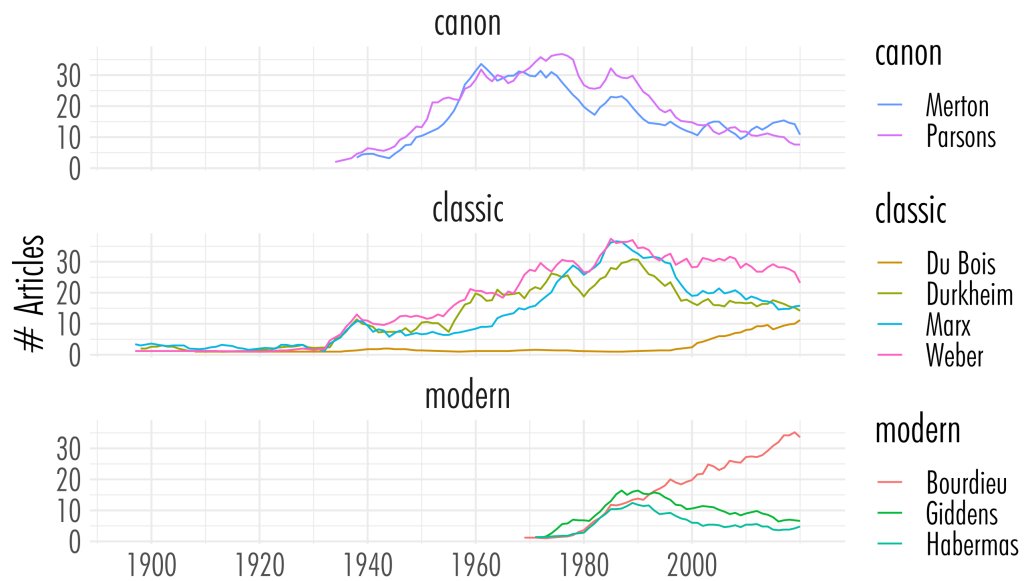
To Conclude

This analysis is only partial. For instance, I select only a small group of journals and authors and ignore the ways in which these theorists are cited. As Stinchcombe (1982) has argued, canonical texts and authors have many functions, the preponderance of which might have shifted over the years. For instance, the classics, when translated and made

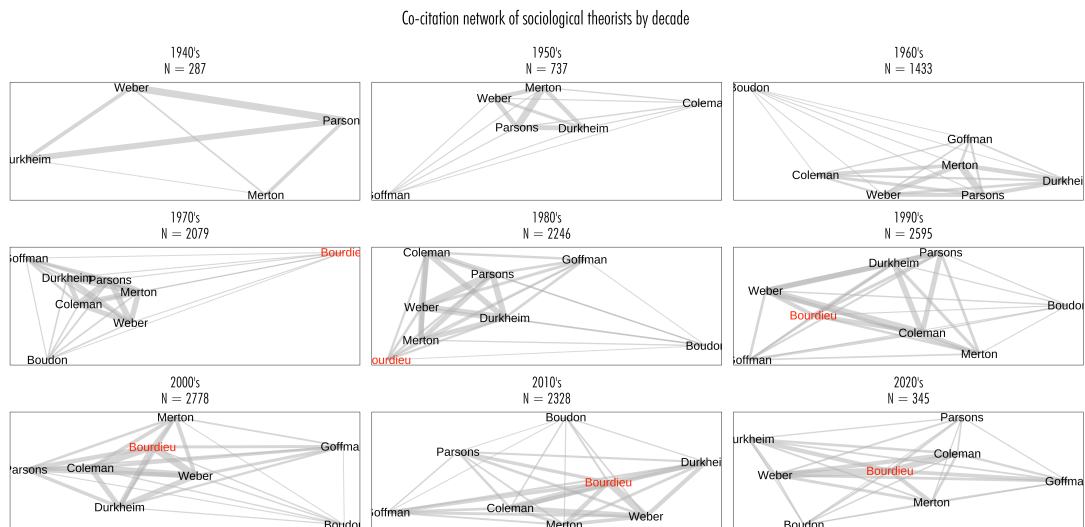
²As search keywords I use the last name of these authors. The logic is that this might increase the rate of false positives but it leaves the possibility open to including journals in which reference formats that do not include full first names.

into the canon, might have been use more as a source of hypothesis and grand ideas guiding the discipline. Later, their use might have shifted towards a positioning act withing a particular sociological perspective.

The Evolution of Sociological Theory



Journals: AJS, ASR, ST, SoE
Sliding window of 4 years



References

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