A Sociological Guilt Trip: Comment on Connell

Author(s): Randall Collins

Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 102, No. 6 (May 1997), pp. 1558-1564

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/231126

A Sociological Guilt Trip: Comment on Connell[1]

Randall Collins
University of California, Riverside

The main arguments of "Why Is Classical Theory Classical?" are as follows. (1) Sociology arose out of the concerns and observations of European colonial empires, which led to the concepts of progress, evolution, and the primitive/modern contrast. (2) For all the evils of this beginning, early sociology had at least a central concern for gender and race, later forgotten. (3) These concerns broke down because of World War I, with the shift of sociology's center to the United States and to concerns for inequality and disorder in urban society. (4) Because this empirical work failed to legitimate itself, a classical canon was adopted.

The polemical power of the article stems from the first two points. Sociology's history is doubly tainted because its true origin is nothing more than the imperial gaze, the self-glorification of European "progress" at the expense of subjugating the nonwhite parts of the world and because the later establishment of a canon is intellectual dishonesty, preventing us from confessing how imperialist we really are.

Points 3 and 4, if presented by themselves, would make little splash. They are supported by observations that are familiar to most historians of sociology and only take on a lurid coloring from the imperialism-of-the-founding-generation polemic. What I will argue is that the first two points are drastically overstated, scarcely more than another one-sided revisionist move of the kind Connell claims to be repudiating. This leaves the last two points dangling. Rhetorical pathos aside, Connell never really answers his main question, Why is classical theory classical? Is it because it is imperialist? Or because it is a mask for imperialism? In fact he has no real explanation of canonicity, just a denunciation of it.

In point 1, the author wants to dismiss accounts that sociology originated in concerns for internal problems of European social change, such as industrialization, the rural/urban shift, and religious secularization. But it is easy to document just how concerned pre-1914 sociologists were with these issues. The earliest generations of the crystalizing field of sociological

[1] Direct correspondence to Randall Collins, Department of Sociology, University of California, Riverside, California 92521-0419.

0002-9602/97/10206-0002$01.50.

argument, Saint-Simon, Comte, de Bonald, de Maistre, and, on the empirical side, Le Play, were centrally concerned with contemporary matters like the French Revolution and what would come after it, the abolition of the aristocracy and the rise of a new class in commercial-industrial society, the threatened abolition of religious faith and the need for a substitute, and the family changes that were the topics of Le Play's research. Connell cites a few scattered examples, such as Durkheim's reference to the Kabyle tribal people of the French Algerian empire, but one can prove anything by selective quotations. I would submit a straightforward factual point: the founding generations of French sociologists wrote much more heavily about the transformation their own society was undergoing than about the contrast between European metropole and colonized Other.

The history of the idea of progress, and of the modern/nonmodern contrast, of course goes much further back. There has been a great deal written about how these ideas originated in Christian eschatology, in the struggles from the 1300s onward between the canons of medieval Scholastics against the Latin classics touted by Renaissance humanists, and again in the famous battle during the 1600s between the "ancients and the moderns" in literature and science. The beginning of the European world system of overseas conquest and economic penetration, beginning in the late 1400s, brought an increasing awareness of non-European societies; I would suggest that European intellectuals for the most part incorporated this material into the framework of ideas already developed. There is of course some merit to Connell's point; writers following Condorcet developed the idea of progress into a theory of universal history by incorporating tribal societies into the European modernists' notion of sequence. The more general problem is how much influence we should attribute to materials from the overseas empires; Connell polemically would like to have all of it.

Connell puts a better face on contrary evidence by the rhetorical move of conflating sociologists' comparisons to historically earlier societies (ancient Greece, Israel, Rome, medieval Europe) with comparisons to subjugated colonial peoples. An alternative sociology of knowledge would explain the rise of these historical concerns by institutional changes within the European intellectual community. The rise of professional historiography in the 19th-century universities was a key part of the background of sociology, and the first analytical breakthroughs came largely from increasing sophistication about what ancient societies were really like. Earlier scholars had portrayed the Greeks and Romans as heroic alabaster statues; it was recent studies of class conflict in these ancient civilizations that enabled the young Marx to write a dissertation on ancient Epicureans and to formulate the theory presented in *The Communist Manifesto.* Durkheim's main teacher was Fustel de Coulanges, who pioneered in un-

covering the ancient property system anchored on the religious rituals of dominant households; it is from Fustel that Durkheim got his most striking ideas about ritual as the mechanism of social solidarity. Weber's most important teachers included Mommsen, the historian of Roman class warfare, as well as the leading experts on legal and economic history of Mediterranean antiquity and the European middle ages. Sociology made its first important analytical steps beyond simplistic concepts of historical progress because a second and third generation of intellectuals were trained in this accumulating knowledge of Europe's history. Marx could now point out processes of economic domination and conflict, Durkheim, processes of moral and symbolic solidarity, and Weber, the multisided mixtures of material, organizational, and ideological conditions of action. These theories were analytically sophisticated because they recognized that such processes occur, in varying combinations, within all human societies. The simplicities of earlier philosophies of progress were overthrown by a paradigm revolution made possible by theorizing the work of several generations of professional historians; and that in turn, rested upon the organizational transformation of the 19th-century university.

Connell ignores the analytical contents of theories, because his polemic concentrates on showing sociology at its worst. For example, Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is not an evolutionist tract about the superiority of modern colonialists over backward natives. It is an explicit analysis of tribal rituals as the archetype of moral integration and symbolic concept-formation within all societies and treats Australian aborigines as exemplars of what is most deeply human. Of course, one may also find genuine Eurocentric biases in sociological writings; there are some of them here and there in Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, but it is much easier to document them in sociologists who were much less influential in the profession. Charles Letourneau's 1881 ethnography of racial differences, like Henry Hughes's sociology in the 1850s defending the slave system of the American South, make shocking examples; ironically, these are more important figures for contemporary guilt seekers like Connell than they were for the historical development of sociological theories and research.

Connell treats the substantive contents of sociology only so far as to claim that the comparative method is simply the imperial gaze. The trouble with this assertion is that sociologists were hardly the only, or the first, intellectuals to use this method. Comparisons were already central in research sciences such as chemistry. The comparative method was analytically regarded by many sociologists as the equivalent of laboratory experiment, a point explicitly made by both John Stuart Mill and Durkheim. A different kind of comparative method was inspired by neo-Kantian philosophy, exploring the formal properties of the several realms

of phenomenal experience; this philosophical program, anchored in the internal politics of German universities in the late 19th century, was the direct stimulus to the typologizing activities of Tönnies, Weber, and Simmel. These comparative approaches could of course be applied by sociologists to the abundance of new materials that came in with the growth of the colonial empires, but once again it was the extension of intellectual patterns already developed in nonimperialist contexts.

Ironically, Connell's picture of the development of sociology suffers from what might be called an Anglocentric gaze. Britain was the main imperial power until 1945 and thus was most oriented toward colonial peoples. But England was not central in establishing the discipline of sociology nor indeed in laying down its main ideas. I think Connell is misled here because he based this study on a collection of 120 sociology textbooks, 1896–1996, all but two of which were published in the United States, Britain, or the former British Empire. Evolutionist ideas were prominent in American sociology until the 1920s, but this was because of American provincialism and intellectual dependence upon Britain. The United States only began to become an independent player in the world intellectual scene at the turn of the 20th century, when the old religious colleges were reformed into research universities along lines pioneered in Germany 100 years earlier. The leading American intellectuals, including the sociologists who launched a more sophisticated period of theorizing and research, were academics like Park and Mead (and also W. E. B. DuBois) who had sojourned in Germany. American sociology was evolutionist (and therefore in some measure influenced by imperialism) during the time when American education remained under British influence; the break from evolutionism coincides with the importation of non-British ideas, initially from Germany.

The thesis of the imperialist origins of sociology works best for Britain, where there is at least some correlation in time. But it is hard to make a case that sociology originated in England, either as an organized discipline or as a set of intellectual innovations. Sociology was much more of a French development (taking off by the time of Saint-Simon's generation), joined by a network of German thinkers crystalizing around the time of Tönnies. French and German intellectuals did not generally follow the lead of English ideas; even in biology, Darwinian evolution was not accepted in France. For France and Germany, the correlation of sociology with imperialism is poor. Germany had very little overseas empire to be concerned with. The political concerns that did affect 19th-century intellectuals were mainly connected with the unification of the German-speaking states; this is one reason that German scholars focused on the history of language and the uniqueness of national cultures, and the most influential schools repudiated British-style evolutionism and biological reductionism.

France became an important imperial power largely after 1880, so there is some correlation in time with the Durkheim generation. But French imperialism fails to account for the earlier generations (Saint-Simon, Comte, Le Play) in which sociology was founded. As a general theme, the claim that imperialism leads to sociology is vastly overstated. The failure of sociology to develop in the earlier great imperial powers (Spain, Portugal, Holland) shows that other factors must be involved.

In point *2*, Connell claims that "race, gender, and sexuality were core issues in sociology" (p. 1521) during this golden age of out-front imperialists. If Connell wants to humble us still further with the argument that, if they were chauvinists, at least they did not hide from the issues the way the rest of us have, then this will have to be more than impressionistically documented. The fact that Tönnies and Durkheim occasionally applied their analyses to gender does not make it their central theme. Again there is conflation: the concern of the 19th-century comparativists with sexuality was not the kind of concern for the imposition of gender patterns spurred by late-20th-century feminism.

Why writers like Sumner were so concerned with sexual exotica can be explained sociologically, but the important conditions were something other than imperialist voyeurism. The late 19th century was the period when the church/state conflict was being fought out on intellectuals' home base. Durkheim participated in the struggle to declericalize the French school system; this was why the issue of religious versus secular morality and solidarity was so central for him. In Germany, the *Kulturkampf* after the 1871 unification of the Protestant north with the Catholic south set the stage for the religious concerns of Nietzsche and Weber. In the United States, one of the most famous leaders of the battle to secularize the colleges was Sumner, who quarreled openly with the president of Yale, the most conservative proponent of the old religious education. Sumner's desire to relativize the moral restraints of puritanical Christianity motivated him to publicize the wide variety of non-Christian ethics and sexual moralities and to ransack the anthropological literature on tribal societies for materials.

It is probably true that sociological attention to gender and sexuality went through a trough in the first half of the 20th century, until the revival of interest by the feminist movement in the 1970s. Connell's explanation of this is weak; to say that interest in gender rose and fell because of the rise and fall of imperialism does not ring true. In the case of sociological concern for race, very likely he is wrong about the trend. Sociologists have been strongly interested in race, from at least the late 19th century continuously through the present. Connell seems to project the concepts of today's political alliances back onto the past; if there is a coalition of people of color with women and gays today, he would like to claim that their

issues always rose and fell together in the past. It is trendy political sloganizing, but it probably is not true.

For point 3, the claim that evolutionism broke down because of World War I is ad hoc. The logic of the previous argument is that imperialism produced the idea of evolutionary progress. But imperialism did not break down in World War I, and in fact the European empires expanded thereafter; the height of empire was the 1920s and 1930s. The intellectual shift during this time tells against the imperialism argument.

Connell has no real explanation of why evolutionism broke down but in effect simply notes that it did. Again this is just the Anglo-American story, since it is convenient for Connell's story line to ignore the sociology of France and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Here he seems to be taken in by his own canon seeking, as if, after Weber and Durkheim are dead, there is no reason to pay attention to those countries. In fact, there was a network of French researchers and theorists stretching directly from Durkheim's nephew Mauss through Lévi-Strauss and Aron to Bourdieu. French sociology has never been intellectually dependent upon the United States, but it simplifies matters for Connell to assume that it became so. For Germany, the devastation of the Nazis makes the question more complex, but here too it is simplistic to assume that the story line is the downfall of evolutionism and the adoption of an American canon.

Ironically, although Connell has repudiated the idea that sociology originated in the problems of urban industrial society, he tacitly embraces the notion that American sociology in the 1920s focused on exactly these questions, although he tries to hide the point by renaming them "social difference and social disorder" (p. 1535). It would be more accurate to admit that these have been perennial themes.

Finally, in point 4, Connell documents that a canon was established in mid-20th-century America, but the explanation is vague. He asserts that the upsurge of empirical research ended in "a severe deficit of legitimacy" (p. 1537), but there is no evidence for this. One could argue the contrary, that empirical sociology was highly regarded for its insights into contemporary social problems, that research was booming in the 1940s and 1950s, and the academic discipline was expanding. The creation of the canon was carried out by rival movements of theorists led by Parsons, Merton, and C. Wright Mills, who bolstered their positions by translating European texts and making personal alliances with European scholars fleeing the Nazis. But the formation of these theoretical camps never undermined empirical research on urban social problems, race and ethnic divisions, and similar issues that have been the main activity of most American sociologists throughout the 20th century.

At this point Connell's argument runs out of ideological steam. He does not appear to have much of an idea what a theory of canonicity would

be. He seems to think it is surprising that the "classic" thinkers focused upon after 1950 were nowhere near as dominant among their contemporaries. In fact this is quite typical of many intellectual fields, such as of philosophy; the number of thinkers in the center of intellectual attention is always much greater in their own lifetimes, and the winnowing down to a few great reputations does not usually occur until about the third generation later. Hume, Kant, and Hegel were surrounded by many names famous among their contemporaries and became canonical objects of study only after a period of eclipse at their death, followed by a later revival. The fact that canons have appeared in many different disciplines, and at many historical periods, undercuts the notion that there is something anomalous about English-speaking sociologists creating a canon in the mid 20th century.

If we are really interested in the sociology of canonicity, rather than in polemicizing about it, these historical patterns open up an opportunity for serious work in the sociology of knowledge. Contributions have been made by Charles Camic, George Ritzer, Norbert Wiley, and others on the rise and fall of sociological paradigms and reputations in American sociology. What we need is to broaden out to the formation of canons in other disciplines and in other parts of the world. Even restricting ourselves to sociology, it is not at all clear that France or Germany have had the same sociological canons as the United States, let alone in all historical periods. Certainly one cannot establish this from Connell's list of sociology textbooks, only two out of 120 of which were originally published in France and none in Germany. The French intellectual world has a different institutional structure and hence a different intellectual history. For a refreshing change of viewpoint, I recommend Johan Heilbron's *The Rise of Social Theory* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995). Its French-centered sociology of the creation of disciplinary discourse is a useful antidote to the Anglocentrism that most of us English-speakers, even Connell, assume all too naturally. Perhaps some day there will be a genuinely cosmopolitan account.