Visualizing the Evolution of Sociological Theory

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1 How theorists make sweeping claims about the popularity of other theorists

Claims about the importance/popularity of this or that theorist are part of the discourse in theory handbooks, courses and informal talk between sociologists. Parsons famously began his SSA asking rhetorically, who now reads Spencer? (Parsons, 1937). Decades later, Bryant wondered who now reads Parsons? (Bryant, 1983). However, just a few years later, Jeffrey Alexander claimed 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". These might seem casual, obviously influenced by one's position in the sociological field and mere garnish to the important ideas of these theorists. But so long as sociological theory/theorists play the role of tokens in the field, and are an important part of the socialization process of sociologist, sharpen our understanding of these processes remains relevant.

2 A new (not so new) approach to getting a hold of the evolution of sociological theory

Here I argue for a complementary way to support such claims, in this case with data and using formal but simple methods. Our discipline leaves extensive written records, which are now digitized and (sometimes) easily accessible in large quantities. Although one could run complex text models on big data sets to study the evolution of the field, I show here how simple formal analyses can also get us a better understanding of some cultural aspects of our own discipline (cite Lee and Martin 2015 here).

3 The Data that I use

To illustrate this idea, I collected a dataset from Google Scholar including all publications from a list of top tier sociology journals on which the name of one of a list of cherry-picked theorists appear. The method has no mystery, I make

queries to Google Scholar in a browser, like any user would. With the help of some code, I automate the process of querying the browser, downloading the underlying html and processing it into a dataset. All code and data are available on my GitHub account.

4   Results

4.1   The establishment of a canon in sociology

It has been argued that the main *function* of the Structure of Social Action was to create a canon for sociology (cit here Camic, 1989). In figure 1 I present counts of the number of publications naming theorist by Journal and year. Parsons' rise went hand in hand with that of Weber and Durkheim. Whether or not the former caused the latter is more difficult to say. Both Parsons and the classics peaked around the 80's and have decay ever since. These authors might still be very much relevant in the field, but perhaps they fulfill other functions and appear in different ways such as textbooks, courses and informal talk. Although it is also often claimed that sociology is a discipline unable to forget its forefathers, that seems ill supported when looking at figure 1.

4.2   The incorporation of Bourdieu into the core of sociology

The skyrocketing popularity Bourdieu can hardly be missed. The trend is even more pronounced in particular journals such as 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 doens'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.**

5   Conclude

This analysis is only partial. For instance, I select only a small group of journals and authors and ignore the ways in which this theorists are cited. As Stinchombe (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 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: R&S, SoE, ST, AJS, ARS, ASR, ESR, SF
Sliding window of 4 years

Co-citation network of sociological theorists by decade

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