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Toward a Historical Sociology of Canonization: Comparing the Development of Sociological Theory in the English-, German-, and French-Language Contexts since the 1950s

Abstract

This paper adds to a vital international tradition of discussing the history of sociological theory by empirically investigating its structure, dynamics, and relationships. Our primary contribution to this tradition is to bring to the conversation a greater level of comparative and historical scope, a more systematic quantitative methodology, and a degree of reflexivity and synthesis. To do so, we examine some 670 editions of sociological-theory books geared toward students, published in English, German, and French between 1950 and 2020. Our empirical analysis highlights patterns, trends, and relationships among the theorists featured in these books, the narratives and approaches that define their visions of sociological theory, and the characteristics of the authors who wrote them. Our findings reveal some key intellectual as well as sociological factors associated with the changing composition of the canon.

Keywords: Social theory; history of sociology; textbooks; intellectual structures; transnational sociology

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E V E R Y Y E A R, thousands of students take courses on the theoretical foundations of sociology. Though they may not know it, they are participating in a process of disciplinary reproduction: core authors, texts, and ideas are defined as reference points for sociological debates. The boundaries of what do—and do not—count as sociological questions are set and disciplinary fault lines are subtly formed, and sometimes contested. While professional sociologists themselves carry out this process, and in many cases engage in theoretical debates about the meaning of terms such as "discipline," "classics," "canons," or "founders," they often do so without detailed empirical knowledge of the very structures they are enacting.

This paper adds to a vital international research tradition that aims to empirically investigate the structures, dynamics, and relationships of sociological theory, examining its patterns, variations, sources, and trends. Our primary contribution to this sociology of sociological theory is to bring to the conversation a greater level of comparative and historical scope, a more systematic quantitative methodology, and a degree of reflexivity and synthesis. Our aim, in other words, is primarily descriptive: we compile and describe data that allows us to empirically observe the structures and dynamics of the field. In a situation where most discussions take place at the level of anecdote and conjecture, description itself is a crucial contribution toward placing the conversation onto a sound empirical footing. This, in turn, provides the basis for investigating explanatory propositions about the drivers of stability and change in the field in future work.

To achieve our aim, we examine some 670 editions of sociological-theory books geared toward students, published in English, German, and French between 1950 and 2020 (250 in English, 229 in German, 189 in French). Our empirical investigation gives a detailed description of the formations and changes of the sociological-theory canon in three linguistic areas.[1] We highlight patterns, trends, and relationships among the theorists featured in these books, the narratives and approaches that define their visions of sociological theory, and the characteristics of the authors who wrote them. In doing so, we observe the narratives of the sociological theory within each language context and how they have shifted over time.

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[1] These are English, French, and German sociology. By focusing on language contexts, we do not distinguish, for example, between Austrian and German, Quebec (or, generally, French Canadian) and French, or British and American sociology. Throughout the article our analysis features linguistic areas, rather than national scientific communities.

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Following the typology of Donald Levine [1995], we find that English-speaking sociology predominantly frames its sociological theories through a "contextualist" approach. Here, authors justify discussing theorists on historicist grounds, featuring those who purportedly defined the field at its inception. As the context around authors changes, they add new classics to the canon and expand and re-evaluate the contents of the story: a searching response to the challenges of capitalism is replaced by an account of oppression and imperialism. We observe, however, a different narrative practice in the German- and French-language contexts. In both domains, over time textbook authors have become far less comfortable with "humanistic" narratives. Even so, "synthetic" narratives faded in German-speaking sociology, a development which was accompanied by a growing interest in the challenges of disciplinary multi-paradigmatization. In French-speaking sociology, there has been a more recent contextualist challenge to the humanism of the past, notably led by authors who received their training outside of Paris, with signs of fragmentation over key figures and ways forward.

The paper proceeds in three sections. First, we review debates about the status of "classics, canons, and founders" [Baehr 2017; Barlösius 2004] in sociological theory,[2] with a view to how these debates have unfolded in recent English, German, and French discussions. Here we highlight the extent to which particular stances on how to teach sociological theory reflect broader "visions of the sociological tradition," approaches to organizing its material whether in terms of authors, concepts, or paradigms, and major patterns of institutional development across and within English, German, and French sociology [Levine 1995; Owens 2015; Turner 1990]. We also discuss the strengths and limits of past assessments of whether there is a canon, who is in it, how it is structured, and how it has varied across time and place. Second, we discuss our data and methodology. We also describe our sample of textbooks, the coding procedures we use to characterize the books, and our analytical approach.

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[2] Social and sociological theory can sometimes mean different things, and the difference can become a topic of theoretical debate. Guzman and Silver [2018], however, find theory courses in sociology departments routinely assign textbooks including either term in the title. Books that include "social theory" in their titles often discuss the history of sociology and consider the work of sociologists. In the present context, the abstract distinction is less salient than whether a textbook is oriented toward sociology students and assigned in sociology courses. That said, there are some signs that the term "social theory" is gaining ground relative to the term "sociological theory," and the nature of the antecedents and consequences of that change are intriguing empirical questions we hope to explore in future work.

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Finally, we report our results in three stages: 1. Statics, 2. Dynamics, and 3. Relations. This allows us to provide contexts and description of this rich theoretical field. In the *statics* section, we examine the overall structure of the field of sociological theory as revealed in our textbook corpus. Here we also describe the overall popularity of theorists within each language context, and their personal characteristics. To address *dynamics*, we examine trends in key variables. In our *relations* section, we examine the relationships between all variables, by way of a correspondence analysis keyed to the textbooks' narratives. To conclude, we offer a discussion that highlights how sociological theory constitutes an enduring disciplinary structure in which the forms and styles of discourse often encompass seemingly disparate contents and authors—even as these forms admit numerous strategies for defending, modifying, or subverting them.

Context and Literature Review

In academia, disciplines are often defined through a "canon" of knowledge or texts that they consider critical both to their identity as a discipline and to the curriculum that they teach students [Baehr 2017]. The content of an academic canon—and even the very notion of a canon itself—is often a point of contention, and in some cases becomes a topic of public political debate. Notable cases include controversies in English literature over which authors are to be considered "classics," and in history about which events and people should be included in Western civilization courses [Bastedo, Altbach, and Gumport 2016]. Such debates turn on questions around what kind of research to reward and discuss, but also come to a head around controversies concerning what works and which thinkers should be taught.

In sociology, the discipline's core is often understood to revolve around "founders" and "classics," in the form of the texts that have articulated its basic theoretical assumptions [Baehr 2017; Barlösius 2004; Holzhauser 2021]. Sociological classics provide a shared reference point around which methodological, ontological, and epistemological debates can play out in a discipline where there are, in principle, no final answers to such questions [Alexander 1987; How 2016; Levine 1995]. The "cognitive stability of the discipline" [Joas and Knöbl 2012: 604] is marked by the coherence and stability of its classical reference points, rather than any allegiance to a particular methodology

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or topic. "Founders" anchor sociology's disciplinary identity in charismatic figures understood as fountainheads of the field's major institutional and intellectual traditions [Baehr 2017]. Because the discipline's classical founders have often been interpreted as "theorists" [Bargheer 2017], theory often becomes a key venue in which general questions about disciplinary identity unfold that cut across subfields. Even so, the question of whether there is such a domain as "theory" distinct from "research" remains a topic of some controversy, with prominent authors such as Pierre Bourdieu favoring categories such as "general sociology." Still, Bourdieu tends to be assimilated to the category of "theorist" in his American and German reception, and even by many French interpreters who have taken stock of more recent theoretical developments [e.g., Corcuff 2019].

The central texts and authors in the theoretical tradition help articulate shared narratives that give meaning to the sociological endeavor. Levine [1995] suggests a typology of such narratives: positivist, pluralist, synthetic, humanist, contextual, and dialogical. In what follows, we examine their different manifestations across language contexts. Positivist narratives envision sociology as a progressive movement toward more secure and reliable objective knowledge about society [Merton 1945] and downplay individual authors in favor of theoretical paradigms or propositions.[3] Pluralist narratives envision sociology as a multiplicity of valuable perspectives, with ever more flowers blooming.[4] Contextualist narratives envision sociological ideas as determined by external forces, such as major historical trends (e.g., wars or economic restructuring) as well as the positionalities of particular authors amidst institutionalized fields of power and privilege.[5] Humanist narratives trace a narrative around sensitive, far-reaching thinkers and fecund texts in need of

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[3] "We can represent [the positivist] narrative in the shape of an upward-sloping curve, moving from uncertain knowledge toward increasingly robust science, but a curve that is jagged, owing to the resistances of tradition and emotionality" [Levine 1995: 16]. Examples of textbooks with positivist narratives include Brown [1963] and Sanderson [2012].

[4] "The generic features of this way of constructing the tradition include the following assumptions: the development of sociology has taken the form of an evolution of divergent theoretical approaches and research agendas; these differences are bound to perdure, although their distribution patterns vary;

these differences are valuable, not harmful; periods of fecund growth are intermittent, alternating with periods of stagnation, regression, or crisis" [Levine 1995: 25]. Examples of textbooks with pluralist narratives include Münch [2008], Turner [1974], and Ritzer [1988], among others.

[5] "What specifically distinguishes the 'contextualist' narratives is their emphasis on some dimension of action outside that of pure investigation as essential in shaping both the aims of sociological work and the directions its cognitive work takes" [Levine 1995: 82]. Examples of such narratives include Parker [1997], Rosa, Strecker, and Kottmann [2018], Zeitlin [1968], and Seidman [2016].

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perpetual reinterpretation, in which entry into the canon is determined primarily by the intrinsic and enduring qualities of the texts or authors in question.[6] Synthetic narratives seek to join multiple authors and traditions into an overarching pattern toward which they are all implicitly moving.[7] Dialogical narratives [Levine 1995; Joas and Knöbl 2009; Martin 2015] see sociological theory as a densely unfolding conversation across generations, in which an array of separate but overlapping traditions emerge.

Conflicts about the field's self-definition are often focused on the inclusion or exclusion of particular theorists and visions from the sociological tradition. Talcott Parsons' [1937] *The Structure of Social Action* may be viewed as a paradigmatic case. He developed a synthetic narrative in which multiple distinct theories "converged" on a single paradigm. In contrast to his Chicago school predecessors who had averred a positivist narrative in which warring theoretical schools would fade away before a "period of investigation and research" [cited in Levine 1995: 17], Parsons maintained the enduring significance of the close study of classical authors as crucial to the task of articulating the basic presuppositions of social research. In turn, Parsons became a target for those advancing contextualist and humanist narratives. Contextualists reinterpreted Parsons' own arguments in the institutional context of his times, as sociology sought to distinguish itself from economics [Camic 1987]. Others reinterpreted the discipline's formative years as marked by ideological responses to the progressive forces of history [Zeitlin 1968] driven by class politics, patriarchy, imperialism, and racial domination [Aßmann and Stollberg 1974; Connell 1997; Go 2020; Gouldner 1980].[8]

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[6] "We may formulate [humanism's] central features as: the assertion that early sociological writings were not essentially different from those of humanistic writers attempting to come to terms with the transformations of urban industrial society; the perception that the most outstanding of these writings represent intellectual achievements of such an order that they merit continued reexamination in the manner of literary or philosophical classics" [Levine 1995]. Fields [1995: xxiv] in her translation of Durkheim's Elementary Forms provides an exemplary illustration: "I recommend this classic in sociology for reading today, even though the ethnography is outdated, and the outlook upon gender quaint, because it presents the opportunity to encounter a dazzlingly complex soul whose burden of life animates the work. It is this same burden

that animates great art." Textbooks with broadly humanist narratives include Kaesler [2012], Callinocos [(1999) 2007], and Law [2007].

[7] "[Synthetic narratives'] essential defining features consist of the following assumptions: theoretic formulations are quite as important as empirical techniques and findings for the advancement of sociology; our present perspective enables us to view … earlier schools as at best partially correct, and to advance a new way of thinking that deserves to dominate the field" [Levine 1995: 48]. Textbooks featuring synthetic narratives include Esser [1999] and Johnson [2008].

[8] It should be clear that contextualism is a concept which has ignited numerous debates within the history of ideas as well as in sociological theory [Skinner 1969; Turner

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Owens [2015] even suggests this contextualist perspective has come to dominate the American field, especially in elite programs. For their part, humanists resisted the synthetic narrative by arguing for the fundamental incommensurability of the viewpoints represented by classical authors [Alexander 1987], and held up the classics as an enduring counterpoint to the field's tendency to lose its way in narrow empirical concerns or conceptual wordplay.

Broader narratives give meaning to debates about the exclusion or inclusion of particular authors in the theoretical canon. *The Structure of Social Action* again provides a case in point. Parsons included in his pantheon of "recent European authors" Weber, Durkheim, Marshall, and Pareto, but excluded Simmel and Marx [Alexander 1987; Levine 1989; Pollini and Sciortino 2001]. For Parsons, Simmel represented a brand of relational and pluralistic sociology he considered pernicious to his own synthetic vision [Levine 1989]. Subsequent efforts to include Simmel were in part an effort to advance relationalism as an alternative to Parsonian synthesis. Similarly, social movements of the 1960s and 1970s elevated a "new" classic: Karl Marx. Marx offered not only a critical and revolutionary perspective for a canon viewed as overly conservative, but also incorporated the contextual narrative that is characteristic of Marx-inspired social thought. Contemporary discussions about W. E. B. Du Bois and the Chicago-school [Burawoy 2021; Morris 2017] further reveal the ongoing weight of disciplinary narratives. Advocates propose a revised disciplinary history featuring Du Bois as an authentic but excluded founder, hoping to thereby incorporate concerns about race into the very core of sociological thought [Loughran 2015]. Thus, the basic historicist structure of contextualist narratives persists.

While debates about disciplinary identity often revolve around who to teach and what narratives to tell students about the field, such debates are inflected by the institutional circumstances in which they unfold. At the highest level, sociological theory is an international arena held together loosely by organizations such as the International Sociological Association and its Research Committee on Sociological Theory, which has members from over 60 countries. The role of the English language as the hegemonic contemporary form of international communication means that features of English-language theory discourse—especially in its American inflection—to some extent set the terms of discussion at this level, whether as a taken-for-granted starting point or as a target of

1983]. Following Levine, we use it here as a broad category to summarize many different approaches without distinguishing between them in detail.

opposition or resistance. The international predominance of English-language sociology in general, and that of the USA in particular, therefore adds another dimension to debates about "the canon" in other settings. In this context, many seek to assert a distinctive local theoretical tradition against American hegemony. For example, in Canada, instructors often assign a Canadian theorist such as Dorothy Smith [Guzman and Silver 2018]. French courses highlight authors that have gained recognition in France but are less renowned internationally, such as Raymond Boudon and Michel Crozier. Likewise, in the German-speaking world, discussions preserve a place for authors like Niklas Luhmann or Helmuth Plessner, both of whom, in one way or the other, expanded certain German philosophical traditions, like phenomenology, to the realm of sociological theory. Nevertheless, lively exchange occurs: American pragmatists (Dewey, Mead, the Chicago school) have recently been much discussed in French sociological theory; Parsons and James Coleman remain major touchstones in German sociology; and American sociology often incorporates French and German theorists such as Latour, Foucault, Habermas, or Joas [Lamont 1987].

Within this global field subsist international domains that are largely defined linguistically. In these domains, communication and exchange occur through a greater circulation of papers and personnel, as well as access to teaching material in a shared language. For example, (American) George Ritzer's textbook is the 80th most popular UK text on opensyllabus.org (among all sociology courses of any type), the 67th in the USA, and the 29th in Canada; (British) Anthony Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* is 100th in Canada, 29th in the UK, and 298th in the USA. To be sure, some books are more prominent in one national context than others, but even here there is considerable overlap. For example, Austin Harrington's *Modern Social Theory: an Introduction* is 34th overall in the UK, appearing on 315 syllabi, yet while lower-ranked in the USA, it still appears on 391 syllabi there. Although there is no non-English equivalent of opensyllabus.org, significant overlap clearly occurs in teaching materials among French- and German-speaking countries. For example, Francophone students in Quebec are at times assigned theory textbooks that provide an overview of the field, like *Histoire des pensées sociologiques* by Jean-Pierre Delas and Bruno Milly, both born and trained in France, along with references to more classic textbooks like that of Henri Mendras. But we also see Quebec authors, notably Guy Rocher with *Introduction à la sociologie générale*, assigned in introductory courses in France that have a focus on theory. Similarly, much theoretical discourse occurs among German speakers across

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Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, facilitated by common texts read and discussed in courses, such as Julius Morel *et al.*'s *Soziologische Theorie: Abriß der Ansätze ihrer Hauptvertreter*, which was written by Austrians and published in Munich and has been reprinted nine times since 1989. Its editions can be found in Swiss, German, Austrian, and South Tyrolean libraries.

Both national and language contexts, in turn, inflect how sociological theory is taught and conceptualized, even as these remain dynamically interconnected. Here we highlight the largest nations within our study areas of English-, French-, and German-language sociological theory. The early 1970s were not only marked by the resurgence of Marxian thought, but also saw major structural transformations in how and where sociological theory is practiced and taught. The center of much active sociological theorizing moved from the USA to continental Europe, leaving behind a progressively narrowed place there for the role of the "theorist" [Lamont 2004; Lizardo 2014] in an increasingly empiricist sociology. Along with the establishment of journals such as *Sociological Theory*, the institutionalization of required "classical" and "contemporary" theory courses in the USA carved out a place for theorists in English-speaking sociology [Bargheer 2017], but this came at a cost: first, there was little room for training in "theoryology" [Martin 2015]—the study of what theorists have written and why—which had previously defined the theorist's education. For example, despite the focus in *The Structure of Social Action* on a small set of authors, Parsons' own textbook, *Theories of Society*, was a massive compendium of over 1400 pages. By contrast, it was in the context of the emerging "classical theory" course that the "Big 3"—Marx, Weber, and Durkheim— attained their trinitarian status. Anthony Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* further argued that sociological perspectives on industrial capitalism could be distilled into these three perspectives. Perhaps following Collins' "rule of three" [2005], Giddens' presentation offered a convenient way to simplify and package a complex field into a more digestible form for a semester classical theory course [Outhwaite 2009]. "Classical theory" in English-speaking sociology henceforth became defined as "the Big 3" plus one or two "others" favored by instructors, while "contemporary sociology" was largely left as an open residual category to be filled in multiple ways [Guzman and Silver 2018].

Second, the classical theory course became prized intellectual real estate in a zero-sum game. Once "the Big 3" had been "canonized" as core to required classical theory courses, any effort to alter the collective disciplinary identity instilled in such courses necessitated intervening in

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the ways those texts were approached, whether by "expanding the canon" to include alternative voices [Lengermann and Niebrugge 2006; Reckwitz 2002], historicizing it [Mouzelis 1997], or rejecting it outright [Connell 2007]. Sociology students are regularly introduced to "canonized thinkers" as key players and figureheads representing disciplinary aims and identity. Thus, adding a new or different author becomes an intellectual-cum-political statement. These changes were aided by the emergence of mass-market textbooks as prepackaged resources that enabled nonspecialists to teach theory courses and present material to students [Manza, Sauder, and Wright 2010]. Accordingly, the "theory textbook" has also become a target for contestation around inclusion and exclusion, with questions of representation by gender, race, and nationality dominating the discussion as part of revised contextualist histories of the field [Connell 1997; Go 2020].

Outside of the institutional setting of English-speaking sociology, theoretical education tends to be more expansive. Guzman and Silver [2018] find, for example, that in Francophone Canada, students have substantially greater opportunities to take specialized theory courses as part of a general education geared toward entering the professional role of "theorist" themselves. Similarly, in continental Europe, mass-market textbooks are much less common, and students more commonly specialize in sociological theory as a subject matter in its own right. This institutional setting inflects how debates about "the canon" unfold.

In the German-language context, sociological theory, like other parts of the field, is primarily organized around chairs held by professors, whose main task in this case is to teach sociological theory. Chairholders maintain considerable authority and autonomy over what and whom they teach, as well as over the teaching activities of their staff. "Schools" routinely develop around chairs, yielding localized theory communities associated with particular places and figures:[9] for instance, system theory in Bielefeld and critical theory in Frankfurt or, looking further back, René König in Cologne, Helmut Schelsky in Münster, and Helmuth Plessner in Göttingen [Fischer and Moebius 2019; Gerhardt 2009; Lepsius 1979; Dahrendorf 1960]. In this context, debates revolve around the effects of proliferating schools and paradigms and the possibility and value of synthesizing this plurality into a single theoretical

[9] To be sure, in the North American context there have been similar "schools," most famously the Chicago school, gathered around Park and Burgess. That said, especially in the postwar period, North American universities have been restructured around departments as the organizing principle rather than chairs, whereas the latter structure persists more prominently in the German-speaking context [ABBOTT 2021].

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schema. For example, Gresshoff, Lindemann, and Schimank [2007] argue that sociology cannot produce knowledge cumulatively with so many different theoretical paradigms. Referencing Merton [1967] and older debates in German academia [Hondrich 1976; Klima 1971], they describe the state of the art in sociological theory as "confusing and fraying discussion situations" where "pseudo-pluralism" makes dialogue across paradigms difficult. Johann A. Schülein [2017], by contrast, doubts that an "Archimedean point" can be detected from which sociology can be founded as a "mono-paradigmatic uniform science" [2017: 191]. In this view, pluralism is not a problem to be solved by synthesis. Rather, controversy about paradigms in sociology is "endemic" because it reflects the complexity and "logic" of sociology's reference object—that is, society [Schülein 2017].

French sociological thought has been organized around a center–periphery model [Clark 1968]. Prestigious Paris research institutes (e.g., the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and the École Normale Supérieure) exert a strong influence over the field. As such, debates over the canon are often presented as "fields of struggle" over more-or-less-central institutional positions, where newer peripheral paradigms seek to replace older ones which, for their part, aim to hold their position [Heilbron 2004; Corcuff 2019; Bénatouïl 1999]. In this context, narratives about sociological theory tend to revolve less around theoretical synthesis of multiple paradigms and more around narratives of "prophets and patrons" [Clark 2013]: specifically, early heroic institution-building and consolidation of the field, followed by the periodic rises and falls of new central figures and contentious debates about their "successors." In the initial "national" narrative on the formation of the discipline, early efforts of institutional builders—like Durkheim—are recognized and made central [Bourdieu and Passeron 1967; Collins 2005; Clark 2013; Masson and Schrecker 2016]. But after a period marked by growth (i.e., between the 1950s and 1970s) that led to differing central visions, the lack of clear replacements (for figures like Bourdieu and Boudon) produced a sense of fragmentation [Tréanton 1991; Lamont 2000; Paulange-Mirovic 2013; Heilbron 2015; Lallement 2019].

In sum, the sociological curriculum across language contexts operates as a mechanism for maintaining disciplinary identity [Alexander 1987]. Required courses and readings mandate that students encounter certain ideas, texts, or visions in order to enter the discipline [Bourdieu 1988; Heilbron 2004; Lenoir 1997]. For this reason, empirical efforts to determine not only which theorists constitute the canon, but also its

evolving size and structure, have often focused on course syllabi, readings, and textbooks. Research has examined textbooks [Alway 1995; Connell 1997; Deegan 2003; Hall 1988; 2000; Hamilton 2003; Harley 2008; Manza, Sauder, and Wright 2010; Mallory and Cormack 2018], syllabi [Guzman and Silver 2018; Grauerholz and Gibson 2006], online course catalogues [Döpking 2016], and compendia [Barlösius 2004; Holzhauser 2021]. Others have supplemented examinations of "the objective canon" with surveys to capture "the subjective canon" [Parker 1997; Lengermann and Niebrugge 2006; Gerhards 2014]. Such empirical work is vital. Many sociologists will have an idea of which authors and paradigms are most widely viewed as indispensable—but where does the certainty come from that these ideas are similar?

As an empirical topic, canonization has been a subject of much debate that hinges mainly on extensive historical analyses and normative argumentation [Collins 1997; Connell 1997; Curato 2013; Go 2020; Guillory 1987; Mouzelis 1997] as well as on a handful of empirical studies [Alway 1995; Connell 1997; Mallory and Cormack 2018; Hamilton 2003; Parker 1997; Lenger, Rieker, and Schneickert 2014; McDonald 2019]. This research has produced valuable results, including a deeper understanding of the complexities accruing to concepts such as "classics" or "founders," of rich narrative typologies, and of intriguing hypotheses about the continuities, variations, and changes in the disciplinary centrality of key ideas, authors, and texts, as well as a deeper understanding of the complexities accruing to concepts such as "classics" or "founders." Nevertheless, this empirical literature remains limited. For example, Connell's [1997] seminal study was based on an analysis of over 100 English-language textbooks published in the period 1896–1996, but offered no description of how this database was analyzed; nor does McDonald's [2019] more recent examination of the gendered character of approximately 10 English-language theory textbooks include such a description. Other efforts have yielded insights but have been limited by the size of their corpus. Alway [1995] looked at the neglect of women thinkers and feminist theories more broadly, rooting her arguments and critiques in an analysis of 17 textbooks; Schrecker [2008] examined "national and universal factors in sociological discourse and practice by testing for what some have called a sociological 'core'" through multiple editions of eight textbooks in France and Britain; whereas Barlösius [2004] examined nine textbooks, albeit French, English, and German ones, to investigate which works are recognized as sociological classics and how these are presented. Surveys have similarly been very small, ranging from one study based on a single instructor's

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classroom [Parker 1997] to one that collected data from roughly 30 colleagues [Gerhards 2014]. The exception is Lenger, Rieder, and Schneickert [2014] who surveyed a much larger pool (some 2200 sociology students across 50 German universities).

Despite these efforts, this body of research has tended to lack not only the comparative perspective necessary to contextualize different language traditions but also consistent and transparent methodological standards for undertaking a historical reappraisal of the development of the field over time. Moreover, many contributions barely acknowledge the existing international literature on these themes. The result is a research literature whose contributors largely argue past one another, and where contributions present themselves as both monoperspectival and presentist in their own right. Questions such as whether the canon was perhaps once different, may have changed over time, and what the effects of this might have been on the discipline are rarely examined in detail. In such a situation, developing data and methods that allow us to describe and map a domain that has generally been approached through intuition, anecdote, and conjecture is a crucial step in placing existing debates onto a more reliable empirical footing [Abbott 2003; Joas 2020; Reed 2011].

This study seeks to take initial steps in that direction, by giving a detailed description of the historical development of sociological-theory canons in three different—but, for the discipline, rather central—linguistic areas. We build upon the existing literature by critically examining its claims in a more systematic empirical fashion. To do so, we specifically examine the changing centrality of "classics" in general, the rise and fall of particular authors, and the prevalence of diverse narrative visions of the sociological tradition, as well as potential sources of variations in these.

Data, methods, and analytical approach

Following previous studies [Alway 1995; Collins 1997; Platt 2008; Mallory and Cormack 2018; McDonald 2019], our primary data consists of theory textbooks. Textbooks act as disciplinary controls ensuring students encounter favored ideas, texts, or visions over others [Bourdieu 1988; Heilbron 2004; Lenoir 1997]. But textbooks are also unique scholarly products, "aimed at large and growing markets as systems of higher education expand around the world" [Manza, Sauder, and Wright 2010: 274]. In this way, textbooks often reproduce dominant paradigms

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within fields of study [Kuhn 1962] and work as forms of cultural transmission [Stray 1994]. Textbook authors must make assumptions about what and who to prioritize as they lay out the disciplinary ideas and debates of sociology to "digest and disseminate" the key ideas that one ought to know in this field [Manza, Sauder, and Wright 2010: 274].

Textbooks have been used to study a wide range of substantive topics. For instance, they have been utilized as historical artifacts that tell us about early sociological concerns [Baker 1988; Brown 1976; Graham 1988; Hobbs 1951; Wagenaar 1988]. Other researchers have used textbooks as means to uncover common areas of interests for sociologists [Best and Schweingruber 2003; Carroll 2017; Dixon and Quirke 2014; Featherstone and Sorrell 2007; Greenwood and Cassidy 1990; Roberts 2017]. They have also been used to study issues of representation with regards to women [Ferree and Hall 1990, 1996; Hall 1988, 2000], racialized groups [Marquez 1994; Najafizadeh and Mennerick 1992; Niemonen 1993; Shaw-Taylor and Benokraitis 1995; Stone 1996], and various disadvantaged groups [Stolley and Hill 1996; Taub and Fanflik 2000]. Yet others have studied their function and formation [Baker 1988; Eitzen 1988; Fullerton 1988; Keith and Ender 2004; Judkins and Hand 1994; Macionis 1988; Manza, Sauder, and Wright 2010; Platt 2008; Stray 1994]. Lastly, they have been analyzed as a means of examining tensions in disciplines that speak to methodological issues [Lynch and Bogen 1997; Schutt 1987; Schacht 1990]. In sum, textbooks not only serve to communicate core ideas to students but also as artifacts which can be used to examine evolving disciplinary practices.

Following this body of prior research, we use textbooks as a window into an academic field. Textbooks constitute a tractable object of analysis by means of which to consider the structure, production, and evolution of sociology as a discipline. While textbooks play a substantial role in the theoretical curriculum, however, they are not the only way professors teach theory. Many also rely on monographs or a selection of primary texts.[10] Clearly, textbooks do not perfectly document the canon of sociological theory. First, they cannot tell us what is concretely taught in seminar rooms. The best way to gather this kind of information is by referring to course syllabi, but these are not publicly available in the

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[10] In their study of Canadian theory syllabi, Guzman and Silver [2018] found that about half used a textbook. Nevertheless, they also found that even when instructors taught without a textbook, they still assigned and structured their courses around the same canonical figures and "classic" texts as were featured in the textbooks. Thus, while we cannot rule out the possibility that instructors who do not use textbooks teach in very different ways than those who use textbooks do, the available evidence points toward substantial similarity.

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German and French contexts, nor is it possible to collect them for the predigital age, as they are not all kept in university archives. Second, textbooks are a lagging indicator of disciplinary change. The process by which a new classic emerges in a field may unfold over many years and only later or very slowly begin to be reflected in textbooks, as for example in the recent case of Du Bois in American sociological theory. Textbooks do not reflect each small canonical variation and mainly react to bigger and dramatic shifts. Third, we neither know exactly who reads textbooks nor, in a world of digitalized copies, whether one textbook is more important than other ones. We deal with this issue by weighting textbooks by the number of their editions. The more editions a textbook has, the more important it becomes in our sample. This is not an exhaustive list of all the disadvantages and advantages of using textbooks to analyze the canon of sociological theory. Nonetheless, it makes it clear that no other source—be it interviews, syllabi, or course catalogues—allows us to decipher the canon of sociological theory over a long period of time. All in all, textbooks provide one of the best available sources of information for a comparative and historical analysis of the field, though their limitations should be kept in mind in interpreting the results.

In this context, we consider a "sociological-theory textbook" to be distinct from a standard theory book, monograph, or handbook. For our purposes, a sociological-theory textbook refers to a book whose audience is made up of students of sociology, who often have not been confronted with sociological theory before. At the same time, textbook authors and their publishing houses also target other instructors who prepare sociological-theory courses or scholars from other fields who want to refer to social theory without having been trained in it.[11] This definition includes both mass-market textbooks such as Ritzer's *Sociological Theory*, distillations of lectures such as Joas and Knöbl's *Social Theory* (*Sozialtheorie: Zwanzig einführende Vorlesungen*), and detailed reviews of the field and its different traditions that are geared toward introducing or inculcating students to it, such as Michel Lallement's *History of Sociological Ideas* (*Histoire des idées sociologiques*).

Our procedure for collecting textbooks meeting this definition were as follows: we used university library databases to compile an initial book list using search terms like: "Sociological Theory," "Social Theory,

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[11] Manza, Sauder, and Wright [2010] give a detailed analysis of introductory sociology textbooks. They convincingly show how publishing houses not only organize textbook distribution via markets but also influence the way in which sociology is presented in them. According to them, publishers stabilize the field by, for example, preferring the triadic juxtaposition of conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, and structural functionalism.

TABLE 1
English, German, and French Sociological-Theory Textbooks
from 1950 to 2020[12]

Decade	English	German	French	Total
1950	5	2	5	12
1960	8	16	5	29
1970	16	45	4	65
1980	25	16	27	68
1990	47	38	30	115
2000	78	70	22	170
2010	71	42	96	209
Total	250	229	189	668

Note: Table 1 lists the sociological-theory textbooks by decade for each language context.

History of Sociological Thought," and "Foundations of Sociology," and their corresponding translations in French and German. We then used the WorldCat library database system to add to this list. Initial book lists resulted in various theoretically oriented books. However, we narrowed our lists to books that are geared toward students. The books' objectives were typically discussed in prefaces or introductions. This resulted in the final dataset, summarized in *Table 1*.

We transformed this raw material (the textbooks) into an analytical object by codifying information about (a) the text, (b) the textbook authors, and (c) the theorists discussed in the texts. Regarding (a), the text, we created three key variables. For the first, *narrative*, we coded each text in terms of Levine's [1995] typology of narratives (discussed above), based on careful reading of each book's introduction, conclusions, and programmatic statements. For the second, *structure*, we coded each text in terms of its organization around authors, concepts (e.g., "structure vs. agency"), theorists (e.g., "Durkheim," "Marx," "Weber"), themes (e.g., "groups and roles," "social identities," "from structures to interactions") or paradigms (e.g., "functionalism," "symbolic interactionism," "feminist thought"). The final variable was *authors*, where for each chapter of every book edition, we identified all the authors that received significant discussion. To ensure consistency across the three language contexts, we developed a coding guide that outlined coding decisions and variable definitions. We met regularly to

[12] The line between what is and what is not a theory textbook is clearly somewhat fuzzy. To evaluate the robustness of our procedures, we conducted some robustness checks that can be found in the online appendix.

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discuss coding decisions and ensure we applied consistent standards. Regarding (b), the textbook authors, we searched publicly available sources to identify each author's gender, birth year, research interests, the university where they received their Ph.D. (including city and country), and their current university affiliation (including most recent city and country). Regarding (c), the theorists, we searched publicly available sources to identify each one's year of birth, primary country of residence, and gender. Our discussion highlights overall patterns and trends in the German-, French-, and English-language contexts, without delving deeply into national differences.[13] All the samples were constructed in the same way. Our sample of German-speaking sociology, for example, includes textbooks that were published in Vienna, while for French-speaking sociology there are some produced by authors who received their Ph.D.s in Belgium and Canada.

Together, the text, textbook authors, and theorists' variables form the basis of our analysis, which proceeds in three major steps. The first of these is *statics*, where we examine the overall structure of the field of sociological theory as revealed in our textbook corpus, using several methods. Network analyses show which authors are most commonly included together. Mapping textbook author locations shows the degree of spatial concentration, while simple cross-tabulations show the distributions of narratives, structures, theorists, and author attributes across regions. The second is the step concerning *dynamics*, where we examine trends in key variables over time. Specifically, we examine trends in theorists' probability of being included in textbooks, focusing first on differences between the periods before and after 2000 and then examining more recent trends since 2010. We also highlight trends in the narrative and organizational structure of textbooks over time, as well as in the country, gender, and age of the theorists they discuss. Diversity

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[13] This is in large part due to methodological challenges. It is very difficult to distinguish between national scientific contexts based on a dataset of textbooks. What gives a textbook a nationality? Is it its authors' nationality? If so, how to account for a book by British sociologist who has always worked in Germany and published his or her book there? Or a textbook by a British author (e.g., Giddens) that is widely read in the USA? Is the location of the publishing house the decisive factor? If so, how to account for publishing houses like Campus-Verlag, which are based in Frankfurt and New York? How many national communities do we have to analyze? What about Australia, Austria, or French-speaking Africa? The further we distinguish, the smaller our samples become. At the same time, what does a national category for textbooks tell us? If students in Quebec read a book from France, are they part of the French sociological community, or of the Canadian? And last but not least, how should we account for translations? While there may be more-or-less-satisfying solutions to these problems, we leave them for future research to address.

indices reveal trends in the degree to which textbooks feature a broad range of theorists or a narrow concentration. We close by turning to *relations*, where we examine the relationships between all of these variables by way of a correspondence analysis keyed to the textbooks' narratives. We also provide additional methodological details. Overall, these various analyses help us to provide a rich empirical description of the evolving field of sociological theory and its canonized figures in a way that had hitherto been impossible.

Findings

Step 1: Statics

What is the overall structure of the field of sociological-theory textbooks?

Textbook authors. We first examine demographic patterns of the authors of sociological-theory textbooks. Table 2 shows authors' gender and age.

Table 2 indicates that textbook authors, across the three language contexts, are also predominantly male and were born in earlier generations: about 88% of textbook authors are male, and the typical author was born in the 1940s. French authors show the strongest gender skew, with only three female authors, while English authors are the most senior. Across all regions, there is a tendency for female authors to be somewhat younger and to have received their Ph.D.s more recently than their male counterparts.

Texts. We next examine overall patterns revealed in the texts themselves, considering their narratives, organization, and theorists discussed. *Figure 1* shows the overall distribution of narratives and structures.

The right panel reveals regional differentiation in the narratives by which theory textbooks ascribe meaning to the sociological tradition. English-language books are substantially more likely to feature contextualist narratives, while contextualism is rarely the predominant story in the German context. By contrast, synthetic, dialogical, and humanistic narratives are relatively more common in German textbooks. Pluralism and humanistic narratives predominate in French sociology, which also features contextualism at rates between the more extreme contrasts of German and English books. Positivism is only present at all as the

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Table 2
Textbook Authors' Gender and Age

	English				German				French			
Gender	N	Proportion	Average Age	Average PhD Year	N	Proportion	Average Age	Average PhD Year	N	Proportion	Average Age	Average PhD Year
Female	17	0.13	74	1984	13	0.13	60	2000	3	0.06	62	1993
Male	111	0.86	80	1990	83	0.86	77	1975	47	0.94	77	1979

Note: Table 2 shows textbook authors' gender and age by each language context. To gather the data, we reviewed university department information, academic profiles, personal websites, CVs, and other forms of public record.

FIGURE 1

*Overall Distribution of Narratives and Structures Used in Textbooks*
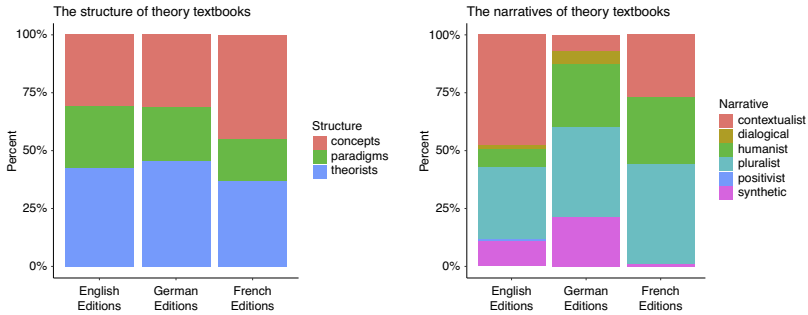
Note: This plot shows differences in the overall distribution of narratives and structures used in textbooks.

predominant narrative in the English-speaking domain. Regarding structures, in no country are most books organized around theorists (the German context coming closest to this), though a theorist-centric organization does predominate in specifically "classical" English-language books (not shown). French textbooks stand out in prioritizing concepts over paradigms, like for example, symbolic interactionism or conflict theory, which are more common in the German and English contexts. Overall, these results confirm the predominance of contextualism in the Anglophone sphere [Owens 2015], while suggesting that this approach is to some degree bound up with the peculiarities of the local institutional dynamics reviewed above. The theorists discussed also vary regionally, though they share key points of reference.

Figure 2 shows the 20 most commonly discussed theorists for each language context since the 1950s. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are among the most frequently discussed authors in English, French, and German books. The three evidently provide the "cognitive core" of the discipline whereby sociologists can formulate theoretical debates. Nevertheless, *Figure 2* indicates that the three authors dominate the discussion much more sharply in the English-speaking region: here, there is a break between the "Big 3" and everybody else. In French-speaking sociology,

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F I G U R E 2

Top 20 Theorists Discussed in Theory Textbooks
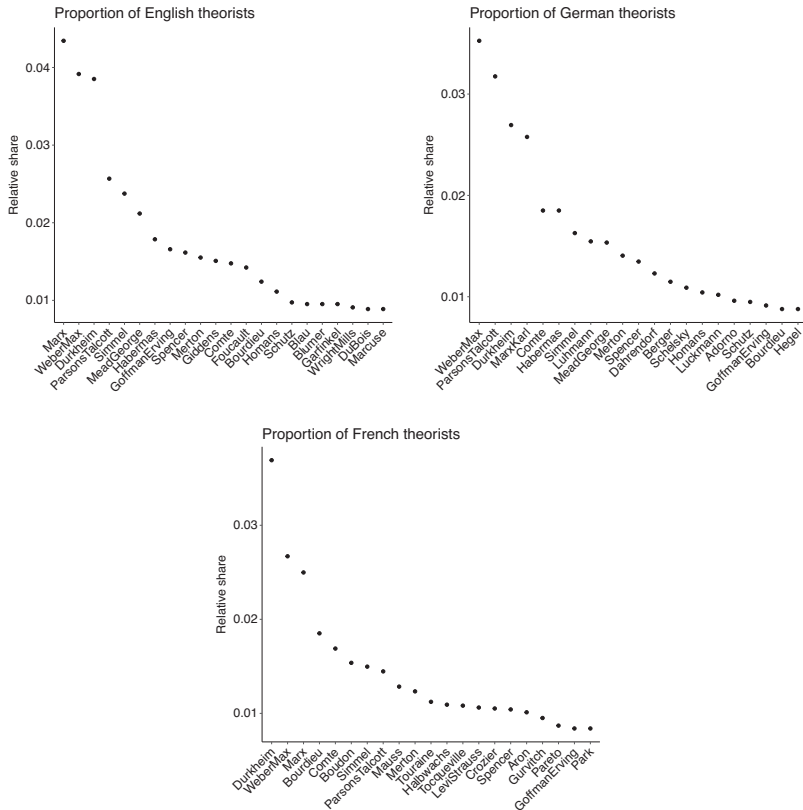
Note: Figure 2 lists the top 20 theorists discussed in theory textbooks for each language context, and the relative proportions of text allocated to all theorists discussed in each setting.

Durkheim stands above all the others. Much of the struggle to attain a central position there amounts to a struggle to gain a place next to Durkheim, with Bourdieu and Boudon as examples of central contemporary figures in this regard. In German-speaking sociology, Weber plays a similar role, though Parsons is more commonly discussed than even Durkheim and Marx, indicating his role in German discourse as the founder and crucial reference point for modern social theory.

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Network analyses shed additional light on the results by showing not only the authors with the highest probability of being discussed but those that are discussed most frequently together in the same textbook. *Figures 3 to 5* show simplified representations of the most frequently co-discussed authors.

The analyses show the web of relations among the theorists discussed in textbooks. The English network (in *Figure 3*) again highlights the dominance of the Marx–Weber–Durkheim triad. It also reveals the bridging function played by Parsons, who appears in both classical and contemporary textbooks and seems to provide a pivot between the two. The recurrent "other" classics beyond the "Big 3" appear here as well, in the edges connecting, for example, Du Bois, Simmel, Comte, and Mead to Marx–Weber–Durkheim. While the Marx–Weber–Durkheim triad does not appear at similarly disproportionate rates in German sociology (*Figure 4*), they do anchor the "classical" conversation there to a similar degree, with Weber occupying a more central position. Parsons again features prominently as a bridging figure, but in the German context he is more commonly connected to Luhmann and Habermas specifically rather than his mid-century American colleagues (C. Wright Mills, Merton, Garfinkel, Homans), as is also the case in the English context. This is perhaps a sign of the role Parsons plays in the German setting of supporting the competing theoretical approaches advanced by Habermas and Luhmann, whereas in the English-speaking domain, he is often assimilated into contextualist narratives about the mid-century development of the field. The French network (*Figure 5*) stands out for the fact that it includes Simmel, Comte, Mauss, and Mead at the center of the network, along with theorists of the specifically French tradition of sociological theory like Tarde or Tocqueville. In contrast to the German and English networks, Parsons plays a somewhat more peripheral role, with stronger connections to French theorists like Bourdieu and Boudon. Here we see how Parsons plays a key but somewhat distinct organizing role in multiple theoretical traditions.

Considerable mixing exists across the contexts as well, with some authors gaining more prominence in "foreign" settings. For example, Foucault is a regular part of English-language discussions but appears less often in French sociological-theory textbooks. Further, Park is discussed with Durkheim, Simmel, and Mead in French sociology, but is more rarely treated as part of the theoretical tradition in the English context—where Du Bois is more commonly treated as a classical theorist. Simmel is also a

FIGURE 3
Theorist Network, English Textbooks
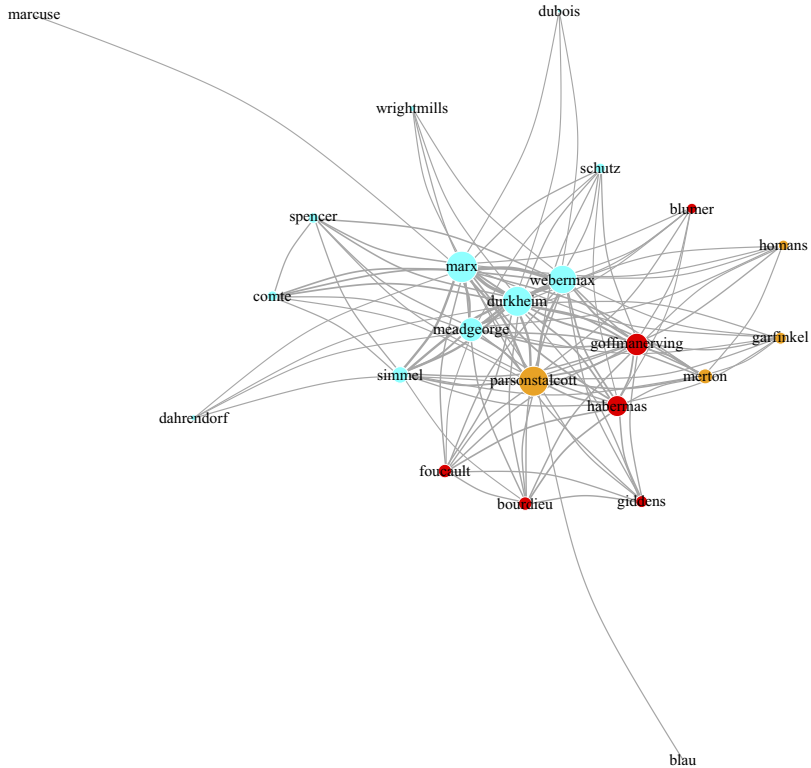
Note: Figures 3 to 5 illustrate co-appearance networks for English, German, and French textbooks respectively. Theorists are considered connected if they appear in the same book. The graphs weight node sizes by the degree centrality of each author, and edge thickness by their edge weight; for legibility, they are restricted to the more commonly co-listed authors. The size of the nodes illustrates a dominance in the field; the connections between nodes illustrate thinkers that are regularly discussed. Nodes are colored according to community membership, determined by a greedy modularity optimization algorithm.

FIGURE 4
Theorist Network, German Textbooks
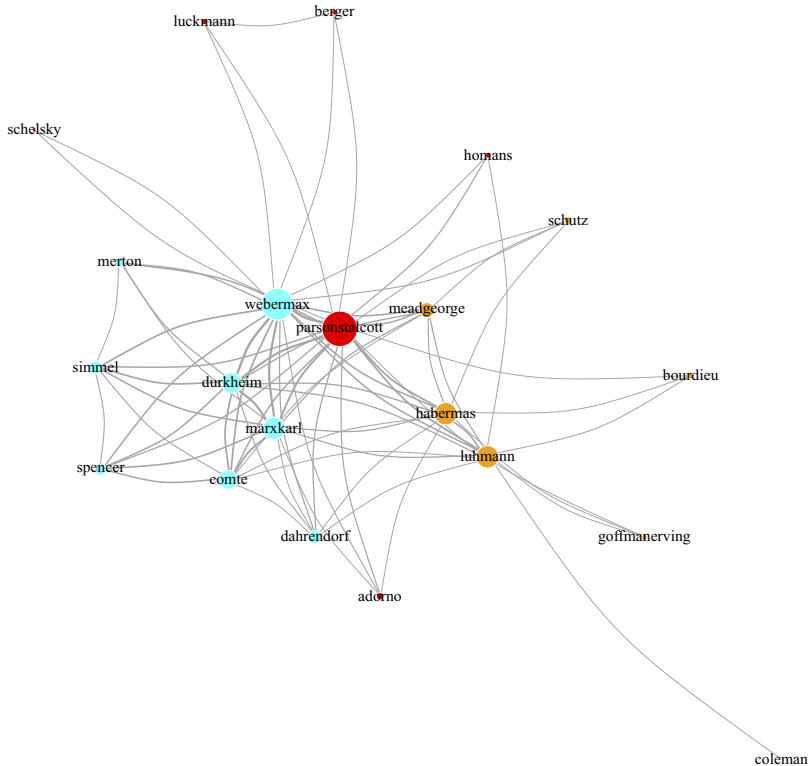
classic on a par with Durkheim and Marx in French sociology, but has a network position similar to Dahrendorf or Mead in the German context.

Examining the distribution of theorists' date of birth, country of origin, and gender points to structural patterns in the types of authors that define the theoretical discourse. As *Figure 6* indicates, English textbooks are most likely to feature American theorists, while rarely discussing German thinkers.[14] French textbooks, for their part,

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[14] These figures treat each theorist as unique. In other words, Max Weber is treated as equal to any other theorist, even though he is discussed much more frequently. This is because, weighting results by how frequently each theorist is discussed would give a somewhat different picture.

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FIGURE 5
Theorist Network, French Textbooks
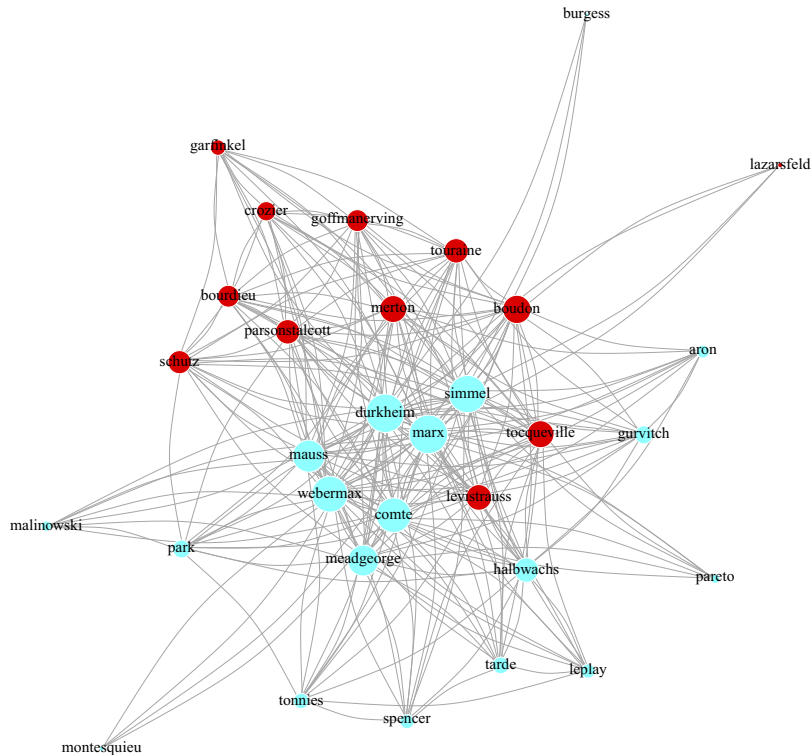
prioritize French theorists. In German-speaking sociology, by contrast, textbooks discuss more American than German thinkers. Throughout, the hegemonic position of American sociology is clear, although it is more so in the German than the French context.

Patterns in theorists' gender are stark. Overall, men comprise at least 83% of theorists in all regions, with a high of 96% for theorists discussed in the French context.

In addition, theorists' dates of birth show that the foundational period of the field continues to define its theoretical conversations: the 1900–1930 era is the source of the greatest percentage of theorists in all regions. English textbooks are, however, substantially less likely to include theorists from early periods, and are more likely to cover theorists from the

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postwar years. German and French textbooks, by contrast, are more likely to include thinkers from the mid-19th century.

Step 2: Dynamics

How have sociological theory textbooks changed?

We now investigate the dynamics of the field, highlighting trends in textbook narratives, theorists, and diversity.

Figure 9 shows trends in textbook narratives. English theory textbooks exhibited substantial consistency, with the contextualist and pluralist narratives predominating throughout, though dialogical and synthetic narratives grew somewhat. French and German theory underwent greater changes. In the German context, the growth in pluralistic at the expense of synthetic and humanistic narratives is striking. In the French context, humanist narratives declined, while contextualist narratives expanded. Overall, while particular authors may come and go, the meaning of the theoretical tradition among English-language theorists remains firmly grounded in a contextualist story. In German- and French-speaking contexts, however, even if the same authors are discussed, their meaning appears to be changing as they become embedded in changing visions of the field.

In *Figure 10*, we examine trends in the theorists most frequently discussed in theory textbooks, highlighting recent shifts in the field. The common trend across regions is the rise of Pierre Bourdieu, who has clearly taken a seat at the table of the canon: his growth was the largest in English and French textbooks, and third largest in the German. But outside of Bourdieu, trajectories are much more distinct. The English-language textbooks show a sharp increase in critical, feminist, and postcolonial theory, indicated by the rise of authors like Du Bois, Adorno, Wallerstein, Foucault, Gramsci, Fanon, Marcuse, Butler, Perkins Gilman, and Benjamin. We also note the rise of R. W. Connell, a major critic of the canon, who was also one of the most increasingly discussed authors within canonical English discourse, though despite her increase she still falls just outside the top 20. These gains came at the expense of authors of the Enlightenment, steeped in the evolutionist-positivist tradition (e.g., Comte, Saint-Simon, Spencer), a trend we observe in all regions, along with some of the theorists associated with the early Chicago school (Znaniecki, Thomas, Sumner, Mead), among others. In German-speaking sociology, Simmel and Weber were even more frequently discussed than in earlier periods, while Luhmann consolidated his central

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F I G U R E 6

Theorists Country of Origin by Language Context
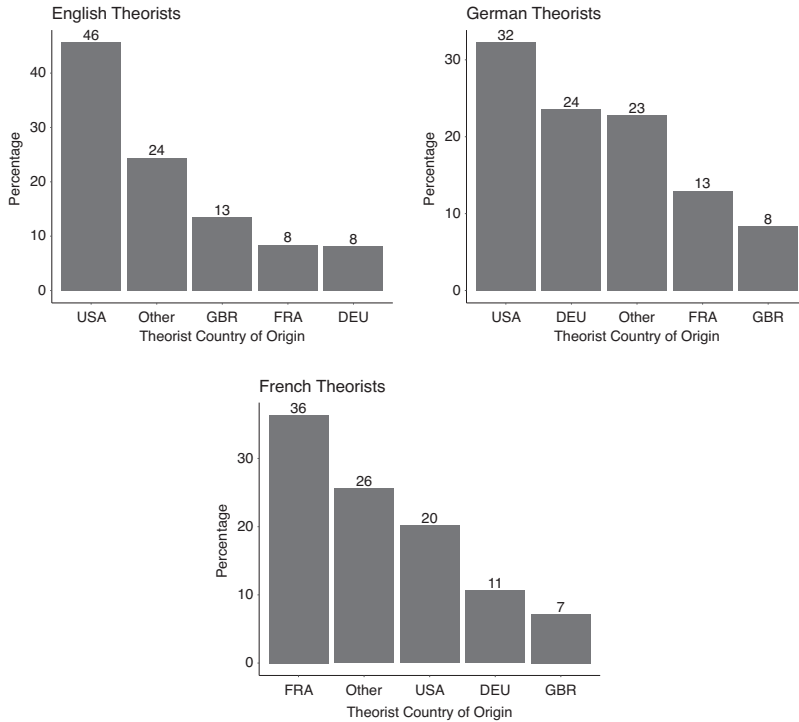
position. James Coleman and Bruno Latour appeared as novel imports, whereas authors like Beck and Baumann rose as key diagnosticians of contemporary societies. At the same time, the interest in René König and Helmut Schelsky (postwar founding figures of sociology in Germany) and Marx decreased (also observed in French-speaking sociology). Moreover, French textbooks, along with the growing presence of Bourdieu himself, increasingly featured authors seen as staking out positions as alternatives or successors to Bourdieu such as Boltanski, Thévenot, and Chiapello, as well as Latour, Lahire, and Wacquant.

In *Figure 11*, we see evidence of the sharp transformation of the field in the period after the 1970s, with a steep concentration of theorist "market share" for English textbooks (around Marx, Weber, Durkheim). This is

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FIGURE 7

Gender of the Theorists by Language Context
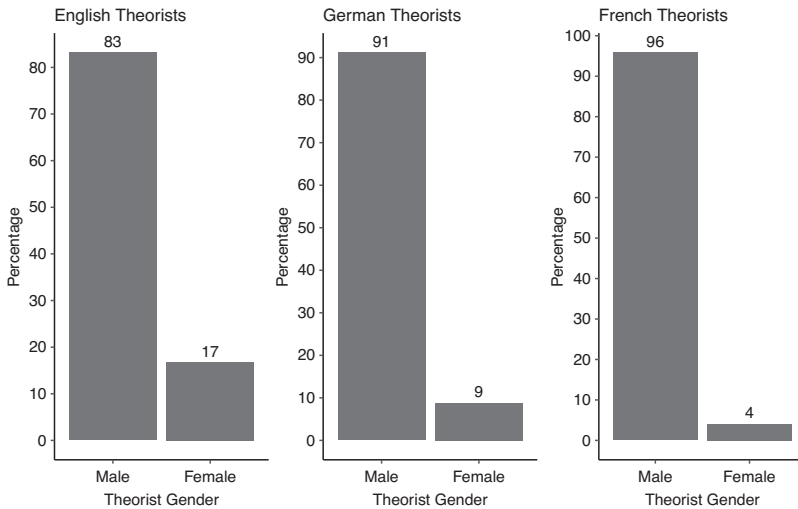
the period when the "classical theory course" as we know it came into existence and reduced the field to a more manageable number of authors. Since then, however, textbooks have shown steadily increasing diversity, albeit with a slight uptick in centralization in the most recent period. French textbooks, by contrast, have become steadily more diverse over the past 50 years. In German-speaking sociology, there was a period of consolidation through 1980, since when the overall diversity of theorists discussed has remained relatively stable and only shifted gradually. Overall, these patterns show how the English-language conversation took a distinctly different course in its extreme canonization of a small number of authors in the 1970s, followed by a countermovement of diversification. The French discourse, in particular, has pluralized in an ever-increasing fashion by featuring a greater range of distinct authors, but has done so without the same degree of inclusion of feminist and postcolonial theorists observed in the English context.

Pluralization in the number of theorists need not correspond to a change in their demography. Indeed, as *Figure 12* shows, French-speaking sociology stands out in terms of the extent to which it almost exclusively features male theorists, even among those born in recent

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F I G U R E 8

Theorist's Period of Birth, by Language Context
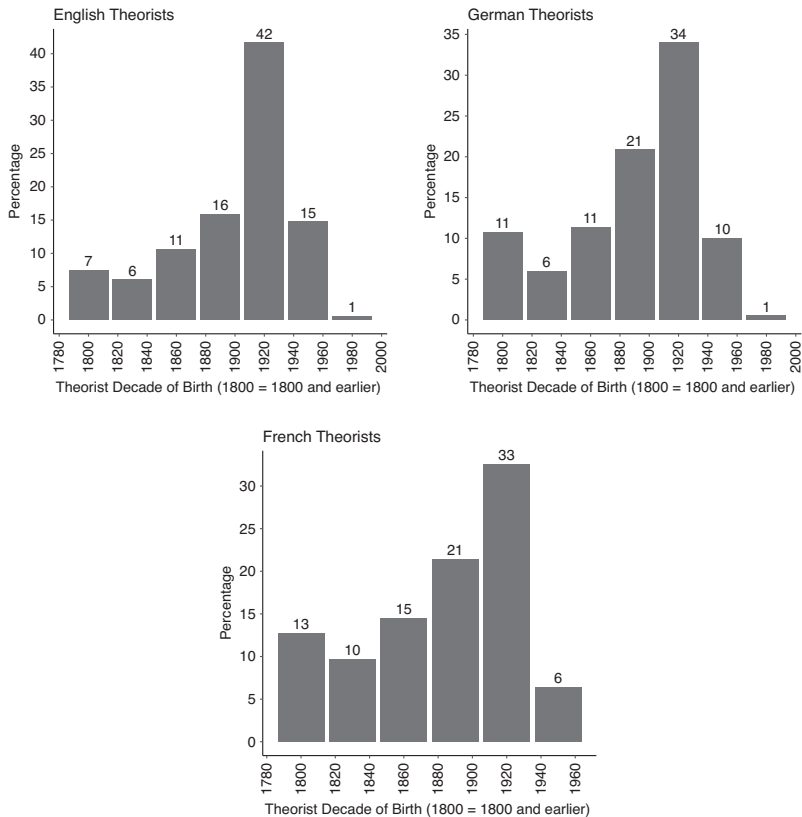
decades, although there has been some diversification. By contrast, in German-language textbooks, women's representation grew by a factor of approximately four between the 1880 cohort and the most recent one (from less than 5% to around 20%). In English-language textbooks, we observe a major shift in the gender distribution, with women's representation growing to be roughly 10 times greater across these cohorts, from about 5% to over 40%. In this way, the growing prominence of pluralism in terms of Levine's narratives of the sociological tradition stands in sharp contrast to the ongoing exclusion of female theorists, especially in France and to a lesser extent in Germany, even for recent cohorts.

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F I G U R E 9

Narratives Used in Theory Textbooks Pre-/Post-2000
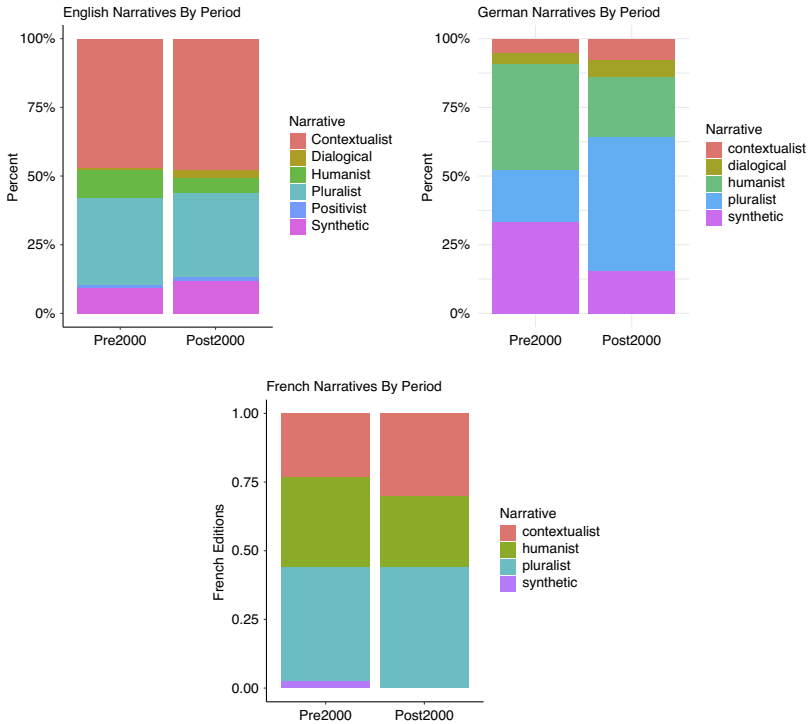
Step 3: Relations

How are various structural components of the field interconnected?

The final stage of our analysis investigates relations. We examine how the various structural components of the theory field hang together in different or similar configurations across contexts. To do so, we use a correspondence analysis to plot multiple factors in relation to the narrative structure of textbooks; this shows a perceptual map that visualizes a correspondence analysis including all three language contexts simultaneously. Below, we examine each context separately as well.

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F I G U R E 1 0

Trends Observed for 20 Theorists Pre- and Post-2010

Note: Figure 10 shows the 20 theorists with the largest increases and decreases in their relative share of the total number of authors discussed for each language context, comparing the periods before and after 2010.

Figure 13 shows that some 90% of the total variation in narratives can be explained by two dimensions. The first and strongest axis divides texts that are more contextualist and humanist, on the one side, from those that are more dialogical, on the other. The former are more common in the French- and English-speaking contexts, tend to feature male and older theorists (born before or during the 1800s), and are more likely to have been published before 2000. The latter tend to discuss more recent and

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FIGURE 11

Overall Diversity Score for Theorists in Theory Textbooks since the 1960s
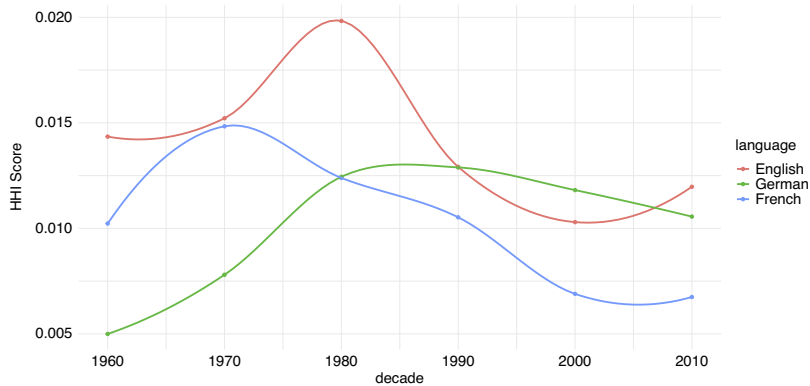
Note: Figure 11 shows trends in overall diversity in the theorists discussed in textbooks since the 1960s measured using Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (HHI) scores. This index is a common metric used in management research to identify the degree to which a given market is dominated by a handful of firms. In our case, the index provides a measure of how much the overall theoretical discussion in textbooks is monopolized by a handful of theorists or spread out over a wide range. The result is proportional to the average market share, weighted by market share. It can range from 0 to 1, with higher values representing greater market concentration.

female theorists. Thus, the first dimension seems to represent a latent cleavage between more traditional forms of theory discussion and newer efforts that include more diverse theorists in the conversation, as well as taking an approach that places them more explicitly in dialogue. The second dimension represents a contrast between synthetic and pluralist approaches, with the former somewhat more common in English-language texts and the latter more common in German and French contexts. Pluralist texts tend to have been published more recently, to have been written by female authors, and to discuss French authors. Synthetic texts tend to discuss German, American, and British theorists, and to come in generic "theory" books rather than those focused on "classical" or "contemporary" theory. Overall, this graph shows core divides between linguistic regions, where German pluralism stands out, as well as a broadly international divide between the backward-looking, male-dominated tradition of

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F I G U R E 1 2

Theorist Gender by 20-Year Intervals
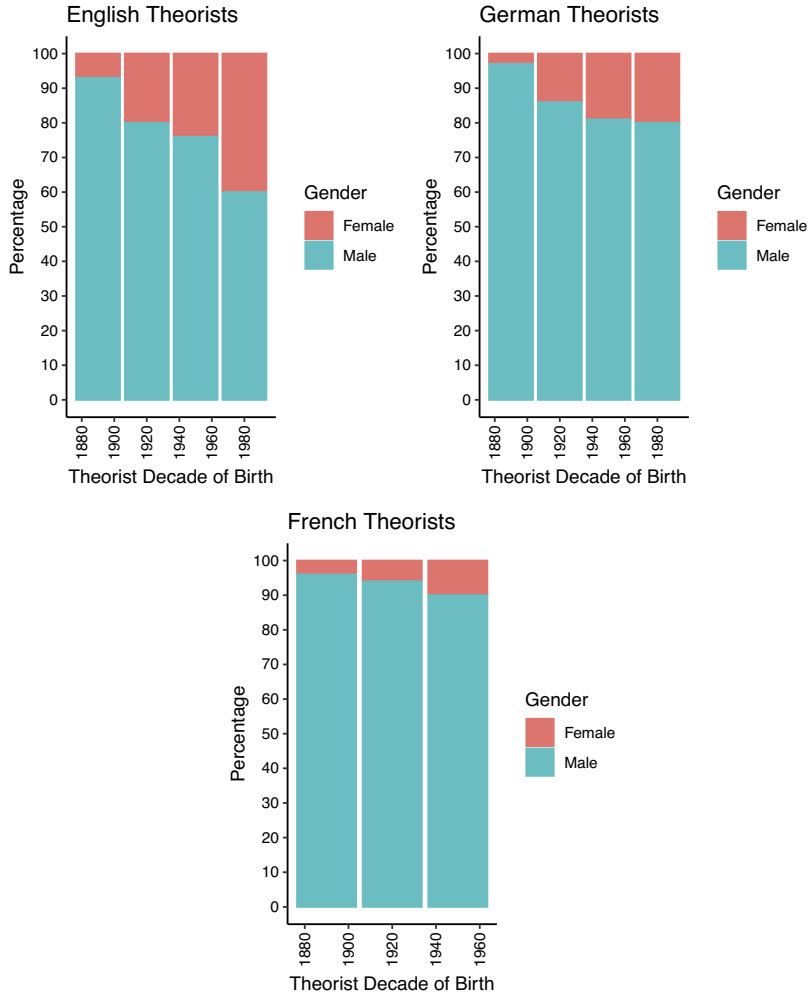
French humanism and recent trends toward the inclusion of women in theory textbooks.

Figure 14 shows similar perceptual maps, now within each context. Here we highlight only the most prominent patterns: starting on the left

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Figure 13

Combined Correspondence Analysis for English, German, and French Theory Textbooks
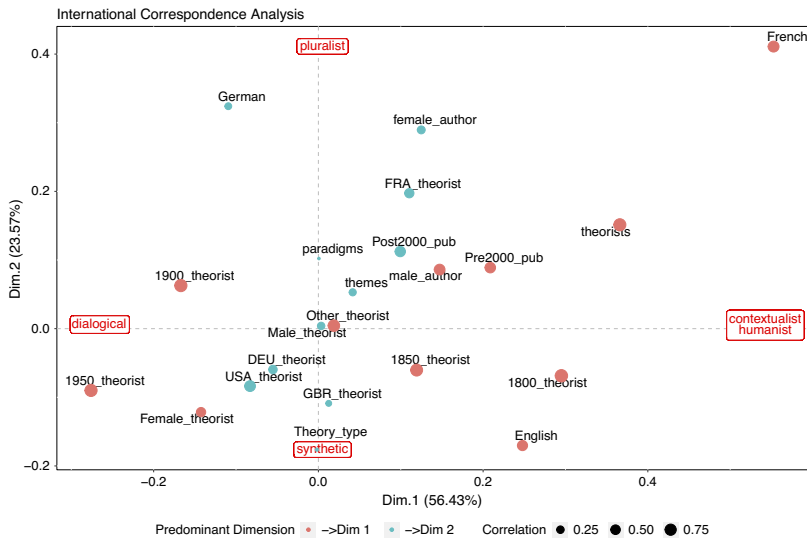
Note: Figure 13 shows results of a combined correspondence analysis for English, German, and French theory textbooks. It is in the style of a "perceptual map," where the axes show the first two dimensions and the percentage of total variance they explain. Axes are named by their major row category contributors.

side with the English domain, a contrast emerges on the vertical axis between synthetic approaches, which feature recent and British authors, and pluralist approaches, comprising works that are more likely to have been written by American women authors and cover contemporary theory. On the horizontal dimension is the dominant contrast, where humanist narratives discuss a narrower range of older authors in "classical theory" textbooks, defined by a "theorist" structure. In the German context, the major divide is between dialogical and humanist narratives, with the former especially likely to include more recent women theorists and the latter being more predominant among older books, which are often organized thematically. Synthetic narratives, by contrast, tend to be built around male American and British theorists, while pluralist narratives integrate more recent books, and tend to have been published

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more recently and to have been written by women. In the French setting, the major divide runs between contextualism and pluralism. Here, too, pluralism tends to be associated with more recent and female theorists (as well as American theorists), whereas contextualism tends to discuss the theorists of the past and be organized thematically. Humanism is more prominent in older books that feature many different theorists organized by theorist rather than themes or paradigms.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis has, admittedly, been primarily descriptive. Description is nevertheless vital, especially in situations where we lack reliable empirical knowledge of the structures and dynamics of a social domain. This is also the case in quantitative research more generally, where approaches emphasizing causal interventions in place of precise descriptive accounts (e.g., on temporal and contextual variability) have led to fundamental issues, notably related to interpretation [Fosse forthcoming; Pearl 2009]. The lack of robust and reliable descriptive empirical works can also be observed in studies *of* and *on* sociological theory. Considerable debate is ongoing about the value and basis of the canon in sociological theory, as its exclusions and inclusions often lack any clear consensus on what sociological theory is and how it may or may not be changing. Having gathered and empirically described the largest comparative database of theory textbooks ever compiled, we contend that this paper is a first step toward remedying the situation.

Several key findings emerged from our comparative and historical description of the sociological-theory discussions across English, German, and French textbooks over a nearly 70-year period. In the English-speaking context, perhaps the most notable fact is the long-run consistency in the narratives authors use to tell the story of sociological theory. Especially for classical theory, contextualism predominates. When discussing theorists, authors often base their justifications on historicist perspectives. They tend to focus on those who were believed to have defined the field at its beginning, whether for better or worse. As times change, new classics are added and the contents of the story are expanded and re-evaluated in response to changing contexts. For example, a previous emphasis on responding to challenges posed by capitalism may be replaced with an account of oppression and imperialism. But the form remains the same as contextualism spans both defenders [Baehr 2017]

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F I G U R E   1 4

Correspondence Analyses per Language Context
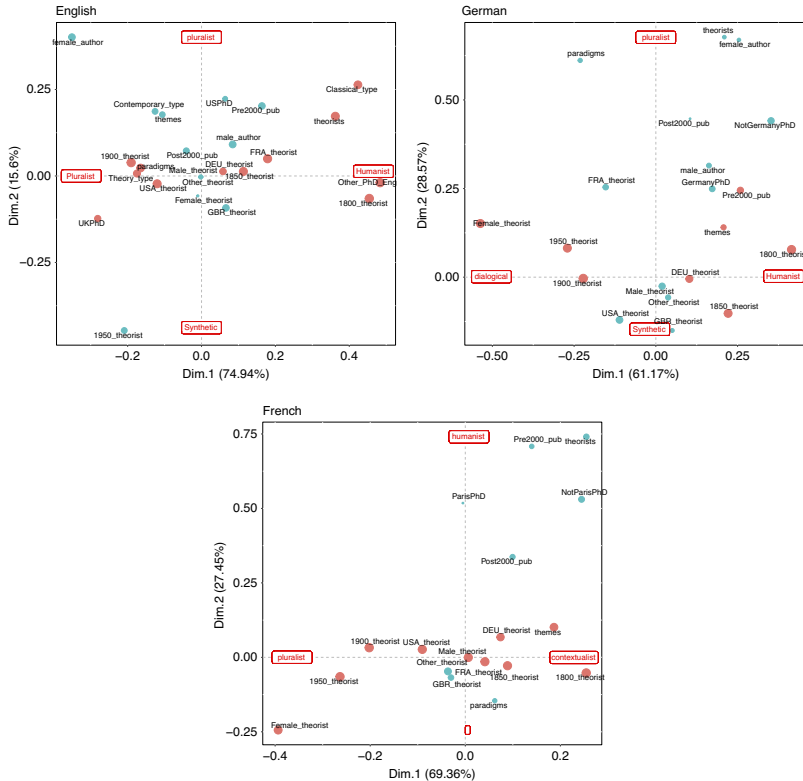
and critics of the traditional canon [Connell 2007]. Perhaps for this reason, English-language textbooks have proven highly responsive to the social and political changes in the field: contextualism is infinitely expansible [Owens 2015]. Accordingly, as the disciplinary context has shifted sharply in the direction of critical, postcolonial, and feminist theory, these and similar ideas have been steadily incorporated into the historical story of the field, along with a growth in the representation of women theorists. A striking example of this responsiveness is the fact that one of the most strident critics of the traditional canon, R. W. Connell, is among the theorists to have seen the largest increase in their authority in theory textbooks. This assimilation into the reigning contextualist

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narrative appears to be far easier than a more radical shift in the narrative form itself would have been, in the direction, for instance, of humanism, positivism, or a unifying synthesis. Thus, two key conclusions of our study are that a) critiques of the idea of the canon are often debates about what should be in that canon and b) narrative forms strongly influence the probability of new entrants being accepted or rejected. These conclusions suggest that ongoing debates about the canon have both manifest and latent dimensions that may not always be evident to participants.

German and French theory textbooks, by contrast, have seen shifts not only in who they discuss but also in the predominant narratives they tell. In both contexts, textbook authors have become far less comfortable with humanistic stories, while synthetic narratives faded in the German context especially. This marks an important shift. Humanism does not justify the inclusion of a small number of classics primarily on the basis of their historical significance or their functional value in terms of integrating the field, though both of these might be the case. Humanism, instead, maintains that nobody establishes a vital connection with an author or idea on the basis of their integrative value. For the humanist, it is the intrinsic quality and power of the text that in the end draws readers to it [Silver *et al*. 2022]. The shift toward contextualism and pluralism indicates a growing lack of confidence in this power, along with a decreasing conviction in the quest for some synthesis that unifies the great diversity of proliferating concepts and paradigms. Pluralism and contextualism offer what appears to be an at least temporarily stable settlement to this situation.

How stable these shifts prove to be is an open question, along with the degree to which they herald broader reorganizations of the field. In French-speaking sociology, the contextualist challenge to mandarin humanism appears to be stronger among authors who received their training outside of Paris: a majority of contextualist textbooks are written by such authors, while the majority of humanist texts come from authors trained in Paris. Whether this narrative form will migrate to the center or permit a fuller renarration remains to be seen. What is clear is that this situation exemplifies a lack of consensus over the inclusion of key figures and paradigms as well as ways forward [Lamont 2000; Moebius and Lothar 2010; Ollion and Abbott 2016]. Views notably diverge over whether progress in theorization is stagnating or whether it is thriving in the context of vibrant, pluralistic debates on the place of theorists in research, teaching, and public discourse [Corcuff 2019; Dubar 2006; Heilbron 2015; Lallement 2019].

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In the German context, we noted a decline of humanism and synthetic narratives and the rise of a pluralism frame within these textbooks. This process may point toward the broader significance of the problems of the multi-paradigmatization that has been vigorously debated there for the last 40 years [Fischer 2014; Luhmann 1981] and has recently became prominent once again, with the founding of the Academy of Sociology and its separation from the German Sociological Association [Hirschauer 2018; Moebius 2021]. Against this interpretation, our analysis shows that there has probably never been a mono-paradigmatic sociological theory in Germany. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, when the canon as a whole was at its least diversified, the variety of German sociological theory was still much less than it had been in English- or French-speaking sociology one or two decades earlier. Since then, theorists like Foucault, Bourdieu, or Latour have been included in the canon, but that has generated only a marginal degree of diversification. Furthermore, the German sociological-theory canon consisted of many more theorists in the 1960s and 1970s than it does today and should therefore, especially in comparison with French-speaking sociological theory, not be regarded as a particularly multi-paradigmatic one, although the noted decline of humanism and synthetic narratives has had its effect.

Finally, despite its narrative stability, the English-speaking tradition, especially in its American version, faces a similarly challenging situation. This largely stems from the institutional fact that theoretical training has narrowed in many cases to a single required course in "classical social theory," which aligns with sociologists becoming less likely to describe themselves as "theorists" [Lamont 2004]. The corresponding narrowing of "classical theory" to Marx–Weber–Durkheim in the early phases of this institutional arrangement made this situation manageable. As the contextualist narrative has inexorably moved "classical theory" in the direction of history of social thought rather than systematics, strains between the theory and practice of social theory have grown. Questions of the contemporary relevance of a discipline primarily devoted to empirical research are growing more acute [Abrutyn 2013; Rojas 2017]. Yet, potential alternatives are difficult, if not impossible, to implement in this institutional context. In the narrow confines of the "classical vs. contemporary" framework, training is challenging to implement in such areas as "theoryology," with a view toward diagnosing the typical conceptual pitfalls encountered in research [Martin 2015], wide-ranging dialogic study of the field as an unfolding of theoretical problems and solutions [Levine 1995], or theoretical skills [Silver 2019], such

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as analysis, exegesis, internal critique, hypothesis-formulation, and synthesis.

Whatever resolution to these diverse challenges emerges, our study has shown the way toward documenting and tracking the evolution of sociological-theory discussions as they continue to unfold. Much remains to be done. Now that we have been succeeded in describing the composition and transformations of the field, it will be possible to formulate and evaluate a range of propositions of how and why these patterns and dynamics occur. For example, we might examine hypotheses about the antecedents and consequences of a shift in English-language sociology away from the term "sociological theory" and toward "social theory." We could formulate propositions about the effects of key changes in disciplinary organization and membership, and investigate whether patterns in our data are consistent with these changes. Closer study of specific national differences would also be a valuable direction to pursue, along with examination of transfers across contexts and more specific studies of the rise and fall of specific theorists. In addition to that, we could broaden our scope and add textbooks from Italian-, Spanish-, Chinese-, or Japanese-language contexts to analyze the extent to which an international discipline has come to exist or whether regional patterns have prevailed. In a qualitative direction, richer analysis of how textbooks articulate who and what they teach would deepen our understanding of the justifications authors provide in maintaining or changing their approach to the canon [Silver *et al*. 2022]. Techniques of computational text analysis of digitized text (e.g., word embeddings, topic modeling) can examine in a precise and reproducible way the patterns that are implicit in the full texts, avoiding the need for coding. Nevertheless, our study has provided a powerful description of the structures, dynamics, and relations that underlie the practice of sociological theory. To know these may turn out not only to be useful for the scholars who introduce students to it, but also to help those students to become sociologists, and this knowledge may thereby reproduce and challenge the boundaries of our common discipline.

Supplementary Material

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