

Phil. Soc. Sci. 16 (1986) 285-301

'That's Classic!' The Phenomenology and Rhetoric of Successful Social Theories*†

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Philosophers of social science have usually examined social theories logically or empirically to discover their formal coherence or testable propositions. Yet these modes of investigation overlook an important aspect of the social theorist's archetypal situation: like the two-faced Roman god Janus he confronts not only a puzzling social world but also a puzzled audience. This double confrontation constrains his social theory in two ways: on the one side it must explain this social world following the rules of logic or the scientific method, on the other side it must take into account the concerns of its audience. Most philosophers of social science have focused on the first constraint: the relation between the social theory and the social world. But for a more complete understanding of how social theories are formed, we need a mode of investigating them that focuses on the second constraint: the relation between the social theory and its audience. It is this latter relation, even more than the former, that determines the social theory's ultimate reputation.

Although no single discipline has investigated social theories in precisely this way, both 'phenomenology' (which studies experience) and 'rhetoric' (which studies its control) come closest to the mode of investigation I envisage.¹ To this new perspective, phenomenology can contribute the idea that individuals organize the objects of their world not logically or empirically but 'phenomenologically', not according to the

* *Received 8.11.84*

† I would like to thank James Bennett for suggesting some connections between my approach and the rhetorical tradition.

1 Since I have so far been unable to think of a name for this mode of investigation, which synthetically applies old approaches to social phenomena to the new topic of social theory (conceived as simply another social phenomenon), I will refer only to the phenomenological and rhetorical perspectives that currently compose it. Symbolic interactionism (which studies the construction of social phenomena) and semiotics (which studies all their communications) could also contribute to it. But rather than discuss the metamethodological issues concerning precisely which perspective contributes what to it, I prefer to get on with the investigation itself to see if the results justify examining the method that arrived at them.

formal rules of thought or the nature of objects but according to their own intentions. Phenomenology has usually studied the 'perception' of natural and social objects from the point of view of the observing subject, but it can also study the 'conception' of intellectual objects from this same point of view. A study that draws on this aspect of phenomenology would be especially appropriate for groups, like intellectuals and academics, whose mental life is largely constituted by cognitive phenomena.

If phenomenology points out that cognitive phenomena are organized *by* individuals, rhetoric points out that they are also organized *for* groups. Rhetoric can contribute to this new perspective the idea that social theorists organize the objects of their world with which their theory deals not only for their own intellectual satisfaction but also for their audience's. Rhetoric has traditionally studied how speakers convince their audience to follow a particular course of action, but it can also study less concrete and practical communication, such as how writers persuade their audience to view some aspect of their world in a particular way.

Rhetoricians have observed that this persuasion occurs especially at certain places in the exposition called 'commonplaces' (Greek: 'koinoi topoi', Latin 'loci communes'). Originally used to aid a speaker in memorizing the steps of his argument, commonplaces consist of well-known (today: 'clichéd') abstract distinctions where most people clearly prefer one alternative to the other (e.g., the good is preferable to the bad). The arguer tries to convince his audience that his position fits their preferred alternative (e.g., *X* is good; *Y* is bad. Therefore you should prefer *X* to *Y*). Commonplaces are forks in the road where the arguer uses various rhetorical techniques ('tropes') to *turn* his audience one way or the other. (Note that there may be more than two alternatives at these junctures but the audience must still choose only one.) What this aspect of rhetoric can contribute to our new mode of investigating social theories is not that most people prefer one alternative to another but that they have common concerns, common places in their cognitive charts where alternative conceptualizations are possible.

I will use the approach developed in this paper to investigate the most successful social theories, the 'classics' of sociology. I will focus on the social theories of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Freud, who would certainly be included in any list of 'classical' social theorists drawn up today.² I will try to reveal the commonplaces all these social

² I do not wish to imply that Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Freud have always been classics. Each has separately, gradually and erratically advanced toward his current position near the centre of sociology. Nor will they always be classics. A somewhat different set of classics inspires every generation. The conflict between 'classic innovation' and 'classic inertia' provokes much of the turbulence in the

theories have in common, the identical audience concerns each of them addressed. I will try to show that each 'classic' social theorist 'turned' his audience at the same points in their mental maps, even though each turned them in different directions.

In a previous article (Davis 1971), I investigated what made the work of these (and other) social theorists 'interesting'. I found that this quality was attributed to social theories that denied various commonly held audience assumptions. For instance, Weber's assertion that the Protestant Ethic produced capitalism denied the then commonly held assumption that religion is either unrelated to the economy or (for Marxists) derived from it. Or Durkheim's assertion that society is prior to and actually constitutes the individual likewise denied the assumption commonly held during his time that the individual is prior to and composes society. Here I wish to extend that article's approach to find the further and more profound features in the work of social theorists regarded as 'classics' that are lacking in the work of those regarded as merely 'interesting'. If the characteristics of a social theory that make it 'classic' speak to *primary* audience concerns or commonplaces, characteristics that make it 'interesting' speak only to *secondary* ones.

Ideally, it would be best to discover these audience concerns through evidence independent of the social theory alleged to speak to them (e.g., through private letters of audience members expressing these concerns). But since it would be a much larger and more difficult enterprise to provide this direct empirical evidence, I will provide only indirect 'logical' evidence. If I can show that parallel parts of each 'classic' social theory spoke to the *same* audience concern, this particular concern is likely to have been so pervasive that, in order to be successful, a social theory had to speak to it. The extent the common audience concerns they addressed are still with us determines how much contemporary audiences still find each of these classical social theorists provocative enough to continue to explore modern society through his conceptual scheme.

Let us proceed, then, to discover what makes Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Freud 'classic' social theorists in order to determine the substantive and formal properties of such classics: what each theory says about society and how it is organized to say it.

UNIQUE AND PERVASIVE FACTORS

Each of these classical social theorists starts from the premiss that their society needs to be 'explained'. The connection between its parts ap-

academy as the younger generation of scholars tries to gain admission for its classics into texts, courses and curricula while the older generation tries to retain theirs. Conflict over the corpus of classics is especially vehement because limited space and time prevent the usual academic solution to academic conflicts: accommodating both sides.

pears unclear, producing a vague social malaise. Their society's very vagueness itself adds to its social malaise. Moreover, its parts seem to be drifting still farther apart; something seems to be increasingly severing their old connections while substituting new connections that are still inchoate.

Each classical social theorist sets himself the task of specifying the factor that disrupted the previous society's equilibrium to create modern society's disequilibrium. It is the presence of this factor, in fact, that most distinguishes modern society from the previous society (and from all other societies).

TABLE 1

	<i>Fundamental Factor</i>	<i>Major Repercussions On</i>	<i>Other Influences On</i>	<i>Surprising Influence On</i>
Marx (1959, 1976a, 1976b, 1976c)	Capitalism	Economic Organization	Government Community Religion Ideology	Seemingly Uneconomic: Marriage
Durkheim (1933)	Division of Labour	Social Organization	Government and Administration Judiciary and Law Religion Tradition Individuality	Seemingly Solitary: Science and Art
Weber (1958a, 1958b, 1958d)	Rationality	Industrial Organization	Finance and Commerce Administration and Law Science and Technology Education and Journalism	Seemingly Irrational: Music
Simmel (1964a, 1964b, 1968a, 1971)	Supra-Individual Entities	Interactional Organization	Social Groups and Institutions Masses and Crowds Cities Cultural Objects	Seemingly Personal: Triadic Interactions
Freud (1960, 1963, 1967, 1971)	Sexual Repression	Psychological Organization	Dreams Children Jokes Crowds	Seemingly Unmotivated: Slips of Tongue and Pen

For this common disintegrative effect, each theorist posits a different cause—a factor he asserts is definable and distinguishable from both its contexts and its effects (though some critics disagree). This factor is fundamental to his social theory in the sense that most (if not all) of his well-known concepts pertain to its origin or consequences, or to techniques to study them. And it is fundamental to his social world in the sense that it produces the waves that have been disrupting the entire surface of modern society. Consequently, each theorist tries to trace out its repercussions on various major aspects of their society—and even on minor ones where its influence would be least expected.

COMPARATIVE ARTICULATIONS

Each fundamental factor can connect modern society's parts in a new way only by severing their previous connection. Consequently, each classical social theorist can attempt to articulate his fundamental factor through the comparative method, which contrasts the new social bonds with the old ones.

Some theorists compare this factor's ubiquitous presence in modern society with its utter absence in a society of the distant past. Freud contrasts modern society's extreme *sexual repression* with most primitive societies' unrestricted sexual expression, arguing that civilization advances precisely by curtailing sexual freedom (1962, 1963). Marx contrasts modern *capitalist* society's coerced labour, industrial technology, and private property with primitive communist societies' free labour, rudimentary tools and common property (1967*b*, 1967*c*).

Other theorists highlight modernity's essential feature by comparing modern society to a society of the near past. Durkheim contrasts modern society's 'organic solidarity', in which the *division of labour* differentiates and interconnects individuals' actions, with preindustrial societies' 'mechanical solidarity', in which the 'collective conscience' unites individuals' beliefs and morality (1933). In a later work, he implicitly finds the inner connections of mechanical solidarity realized more perfectly in more primitive societies (1961*a*). Simmel contrasts how the individual relates to the multiple, large, intersecting *supra-individual entities* of a modern society with how the individual related to the fewer, smaller, concentric supra-individual entities of medieval society—a natural evolution facilitated by specialization, monetary exchange and urbanization (1964*a*, 1964*c*, 1968*a*, 1971, 1978).

Weber accents the omnipresent *rationalizations* of modern Western civilization with the widest array of contrast grounds: with patriarchal and patrimonial societies of the distant past whose traditions were their antitheses, with the pre-Reformation Catholic monastic society directly before they developed, and with other advanced civilizations—Chinese

and Indian—where they are conspicuous by their absence (or more accurately, their much lesser presence) (1951, 1958*a*, 1958*c*, 1978*f*).

DISINTEGRATE THE INDIVIDUAL

It would be a purely academic activity (in both senses) to discuss a factor that only connects the parts of society in a new way while weakening their traditional ties—even one that causes ordinary social problems in the process (poverty, conflict, alcoholism, etc.). Unless the theorist's fundamental factor also collides with something his audience holds dear, they would find his exhaustive analysis of it at best merely 'interesting'. But if he can convince them that the irresistible force of his fundamental factor is about to destroy their ideally immovable valued object, they would find it far more than interesting—indeed imperative—to understand the fundamental factor in order to control its ramifications.

One would be hard pressed to come up with something more highly prized in Western society than the psychological integrity of the individual. Each classical social theorist, therefore, tries to dramatize the confrontation between his fundamental factor and (what he posits as) an essential feature of human nature. Some of their best known concepts describe the detrimental effects of this clash.

DEVITALIZE THE SOCIETY

Each classical social theorist shows how their fundamental factor not only undermines the individual's integrity but also saps the society's vitality. Their fundamental factor attacks society at its most vulnerable point: where (the theorist implies) the dynamism necessary for its continuing operation resides.

Capitalism, for Marx, increasingly severs social creativity from social control. The proletarians, the class of workers that actually produces the products, are the energizing force of modern society. The bourgeoisie, the class of non-workers that acquires the money to consume these products, are its enervating rulers. Modern society has been rapidly losing its stability as capitalism continues to widen the gap between the dynamic productivity of the proletarians and the empty formal authority of the bourgeoisie (1959, 1967*c*).

Durkheim locates the vital energy of society in the collective ideas and sentiments its members regard as 'sacred'. This sacred energy, periodically recharged by religious practices, invigorates individuals and their social connection. But in modern society, *the division of labour*, indirectly and temporarily, has disrupted the social unity necessary for its renewal. Consequently, those whose connection to society's vitalizing sacred center has been attenuated by weakening collective energy fall back into the 'profane' world, chaotically governed by egocentric and biological passions (1961*a*).

TABLE 2

	<i>Human Nature's Essential Need</i>	<i>Fundamental Factor Undermines it by</i>	<i>Individual Experiences Impairment as</i>
Marx (1976 <i>a</i> , 1976 <i>b</i> , 1976 <i>c</i>)	Unification	Segregating economic, political, social, religious and ideological objects from actors	'Alienation'
Durkheim (1933, 1951, 1961 <i>b</i>)	Shaping	Weakening the common membership and consciousness that channelled and regulated individuals' natural impulses	Social 'Ego-ism' and Moral 'Anomie'
Weber (1978 <i>a</i> , 1978 <i>b</i> , 1978 <i>d</i> , 1978 <i>e</i>)	Uniqueness	Bureaucratizing service, especially government, organizations	'Impersonal' treatment
Simmel (1964 <i>a</i> , 1968 <i>a</i> , 1971)	Development	Evolving without concern for its effect on personal growth ³	'Overwhelmed' inner life ⁴
Freud (1962, 1963)	Expression	Constraining instincts externally (through laws) and internally (through superego formation)	'nervousness' ('Neurosis')

3 Since Simmel's social theory is more complex and less well known than the others', this table entry needs some elaboration. Human beings, in Simmel's view, innately have dual desires: to be free and to be fulfilled. Some of modern society's *supra-individual entities* (especially the social ones) help the individual satisfy the first desire (for autonomy) by freeing him from the constraints of the smaller supra-individual entities prevalent in the past. But other of modern society's supra-individual entities (especially, but not exclusively, the cultural ones) frustrate the satisfaction of the individual's second desire (for self-development). Individuals develop their selves first by externalizing their internal tendencies into cultural objects where they can more easily work on and improve them ('objective culture'), and then by reinternalizing these perfected objects for personal growth ('subjective culture'). But, particularly in modern society, these cultural objects that individuals originally created begin to evolve according to their own laws—gradually turning into supra-individual entities hostile to (or at best indifferent to) the individual's need to reabsorb them for personal development. In sum, a plethora of supra-individual entities that both free individuals' outer behaviour but 'overwhelm' their inner life give modern society its paradoxical tone (1964*a*, 1968*a*, 1971).

4 Many of Simmel's most remembered expressions describe the reaction of those whose inner life is overwhelmed by both cultural and social supra-individual units: they 'overspecialize' or 'fragment' their personalities, they feel 'inadequate' or 'helpless' or 'depressed', they become 'blasé' toward external stimuli or 'reserved' toward other people, they 'regress' in spirituality or delicacy or idealism, they emphasize their most 'primitive' or 'mediocre' personal qualities, their 'lowest common denominator' (1964*a*, 1964*b*, 1968*a*).

The Protestant Weber locates the vitalizing religious energy of society at the opposite pole from the Jewish (and Catholic-influenced) Durkheim. Unlike Durkheim who equated the sacred with the social, Weber equated it with the great individual, the 'charismatic' founders of religions who energized their disciples' lives with meaning. Unfortunately, the *rationalism* of modern Western society undermines this vitalizing religious meaning both by 'secularizing' its ideal aspects (religious symbols) in an increasingly disenchanted world and by 'routinizing' its material aspects (religious leaders) in an increasingly large and legalistic church bureaucracy. Thus religion loses its power to energize society for Weber, not by becoming more profane and individual as for Durkheim, but by becoming more secular and social (bureaucratic) (1958*d*, 1978*c*, 1978*g*).

Simmel formulates the separation between social energy and social structure more abstractly and concisely than the other theorists. As noted, individuals originally create and energize social and cultural forms for their own purposes, but these *supra-individual entities* eventually begin to develop in their own way—indifferent to the lives of their creators. Modern society has come to consist of two increasingly remote elements: supra-individual entities grown empty and rigid on the one hand, and the individual with his restless unformed vital energy on the other (1968*a*).

Freud locates the ultimate source of the vital energy necessary to drive society in the individual's sexual instinct ('id', 'libido', 'Eros'). All societies can obtain the energy necessary for their operation and enhancement only by repressing the individual's sexual instinct to rechannel it from personal pleasure toward social goals. The neuroses produced by the excessive *sexual repression* in modern society, however, render the individual less useful to society, actually reducing the amount of instinctual energy available for social purposes (1962, 1963).

To the extent that their fundamental factor debilitates social dynamics, all the classical social theorists regard it as a 'disease' of the key linkage that holds their society together. Each, however, locates this crucial coupling on a different level. Weber: society is held together at the 'top', by a government which strives to reconcile antithetical economic utilities and social affinities. *Rationalization*, which secularizes authority legitimations and bureaucratizes organizations, is primarily a pathology of government (1978*b*, 1978*c*). Marx and Durkheim: society is held together in the 'middle', by inherent collective bonds. Both *capitalism* (1967*a*) and the *division of labour* (1933) are centrifugal social forces that in their different ways attenuate these natural ties between individual and group. Simmel: society is held together at the 'bottom', by the continually synthesizing interactions

between individuals. The one-sided vertical relation between individual and *supra-individual unit* increasingly prevalent in modern society lacks the pure flow of reciprocal interaction that generates these dynamic social syntheses (1964*b*, 1968*a*). Freud: society is held together on the 'inside', by its members' libidinal ties to one another and especially to a common leader. The extreme *sexual repression* of modern society exaggerates this intrapsychic identification with a leader into a dangerous neurotic dependence (1965).

SPREADING EVIL

Although no classical social theorist wants to return to an earlier stage of society, each regards his fundamental factor as the major source of evil in the modern world to the degree that it undermines the individual and the society. Worse, each fears its malignancies will metastasize in the near future—although each hopes for their remission, or even their regression, in the more distant future. To help bring about this less bleak alternative each theorist posits an agency to challenge the fundamental factor or at least mitigate its harmful effects.

TABLE 3

	<i>Fundamental Factor's Increasing Effects Lead to</i>	<i>Countering Agency</i>	<i>Countering Activity</i>
Marx (1959, 1976 <i>a</i> , 1976 <i>b</i> , 1976 <i>c</i>)	Unbalanced society's eventual collapse	'Working Class'	Hastening social collapse to rebuild a society that reintegrates individuals' identities
Durkheim (1933, 1951, 1961 <i>a</i>)	Short-run psychological and social problems adjusting to it	'Intermediate (occupational) Groups'	Mediating between individual and society to replace declining family and community ties; reviving religion
Weber (1958 <i>d</i> , 1978 <i>b</i> , 1978 <i>c</i>)	Hyper-order and Homogeneity	'Charismatic Leader'	Reversing bureaucratization and secularization
Simmel (1968 <i>b</i>)	Form subjugating Life	'Avant-garde' and Younger Generation	Opposing all supra-individual forms
Freud (1962, 1963)	Continual Self-destructive Neurosis	'Psychoanalysts'	Reducing sexual repression on individual, if not social, level; maintaining repression against aggressive instinct

SIMPLE AND SUBTLE

The reader might have objected to my discussion of these classical social theorists as too simple. Surely reducing their entire works to the elaboration of single factors obscures their complexity and subtlety. This objection may be technically correct but it is phenomenologically and pragmatically false—at least for much of their audience.

This audience is not homogeneous, as rhetoricians often assume, but divided into various subgroups. For the audience of classical social theorists, the most important split is between theory specialists, who devote their entire careers to ‘understanding’ them, and generalists, whose acquaintance with them is only passing. If theory specialists have read nearly everything the theorists had written, perhaps even in its original language, generalists have read only translated selections from them in their undergraduate or graduate theory courses and possibly a few popular secondary sources later in their careers.

Each classical social theory ‘looks different’ to those who specialize in them and those who don’t. Specialists view the theory as an increasingly clear, highly articulated organization of many concepts and their complex relations (as well as a collection of definite problems with some of these concepts and relations). Generalists, on the other hand, have only an indistinct ‘general impression’ of the theory, which they experience as a loose organization of a few famous concepts, the ‘clichés’ of the theory.

Nearly every theory specialist, of course, continually tries to correct the generalists’ ‘misapprehensions’ of the classical social theories by substituting his ‘subtle’ interpretations for their ‘simple’ ones (Davis 1971). But for generalists the sheer number of specialists’ studies seem only to confuse further what each individual study sought to clarify. Critiques of the classical social theorists have become so numerous and contradictory that they overwhelm the ability of even the most dedicated browser of journals and books to organize them into a coherent whole. Consequently, those who do not specialize in the classical social theories come to conceive them in a way that diverges increasingly from the conception of those who do. Specialists may be able to put in the time and effort necessary to sort out all the new interpretations, but generalists (despite temporary flashes of clarifying insight during sporadic efforts to keep current) often find their comprehension of these classics losing focus as the concepts associated with each theorist they vaguely remember drift even farther apart.

Specialists who have tried to transform the generalist view of the classical social theories, then, may leave the generalist more confused than before. The above treatment, on the other hand, tries not to change but to stabilize the generalist view by presenting an idealized version of it. Since the generalist’s impression of a classical social theory is so

unstable, his or her mental organization of its concepts will diffuse unless he or she continually recalls their central connection. Reducing each classical social theory to the effects of a fundamental factor, therefore, will facilitate the generalist's ability to grasp the essence of the theory by a single handle, an easily remembered central principle around which to derive and organize each of its major concepts.

On the other side, a complex theory, which forces those who wish to comprehend it to exert themselves cognitively, appeals to those theory specialists in its audience who feel that theories they must strive to pull together must be worth the mental effort they expend. Beyond a certain level of obscurity, however, even they reject a theory as 'not worth the effort' to understand.

Since a social theory's audience comprises both those with a low level of interest in and sophistication about the theory, and those with a high level, a successful social theory must be 'multi-layered' to appeal to both groups. The classical social theories I examined contain enough seemingly easily grasped famous concepts to attract generalists, and enough difficult (but not impossible) to grasp complexity within and between these concepts to attract specialists.⁵

AMBIGUOUS AND INCOMPLETE

Even accepting my generalist orientation, the reader might still have disagreed with my interpretation of one or more classical social theorists—either with the concept I designated as fundamental or with the way I linked other concepts to it. Whatever this disagreement reveals about my interpretive competence, it indicates that the social theory itself lacks structural integrity, that the way the social theorist related his concepts makes them susceptible to various interpretations. Since Durkheim never explicitly connected his later work to the division of labour, we can only infer their connection. And since Simmel is so multifaceted a theorist, his work looks very different depending on the conceptual facet through which we view it. Social theories whose concepts are only 'loosely coupled' are subject to alternative organizations. (Note that this lack of structural integrity is a property of the theory itself, and not produced by our ignorance of it. A social theory may be not merely complex, but inherently ambiguous.)

Had each classical social theorist expounded his social theory as single-mindedly as I have tried to do, we might not regard him today as 'classical'. Ambiguity in social science is not the embarrassment Kuhn finds it in natural science (1962)—rather it is crucial to the social

5 Still to be studied are the social theory's 'transition mechanisms' that entice the naive student or generalist to move beyond its surface clichés in order to explore its interior complexity.

theorist's appeal.⁶ An ambiguous theory can appeal to different—even hostile—divisions of its audience, allowing each subgroup to interpret the theory in congenial, if mutually incompatible, ways.

Moreover, the classical social theorist's very incoherence, which makes him so difficult for students to understand, allows teachers to fill classroom time by synthesizing his scattered and unrelated ideas into a coherent whole. Some are proud to be able to point out his inconsistencies; others are ashamed to admit that a founder of their field did not always know what he was talking about, and are eager to find some means to interpret his inconsistencies away (which ethnomethodologists call an 'account'). The most common accounting technique is to temporize the incongruity by suggesting that each social theorist had different concerns at different stages of his career: he reacted to a personal crisis or a sociohistorical event by completely reversing his thinking on society or by merely shifting his emphasis while retaining his central thrust.

Temporizing and other accounting techniques have been used to resolve the following 'core ambiguities' in the way each classical social theorist elaborates his fundamental factor. Marx vacillated between asserting that the workers must collapse *capitalism* through an existential act and asserting that its collapse is historically determined through an inherent economic flaw (1959, 1967c). Durkheim was ambivalent about whether the *division of labour* was more likely to produce the 'good' autonomous individual whose socially destructive biological appetites are morally regulated or the 'bad' anomic individual whose socially destructive biological appetites are out of control (1933, 1951, 1961b). Simmel described how modern *supra-individual entities* affect the individual's development in contradictory ways: enhancing it by weakening traditional external constraints on the one hand, hindering it by failing to provide requisite internal resources on the other (1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1968a, 1971). Weber treated *rationality* not only as the preeminent factor in modern society, but also as merely one of a number of equally influential and interacting material and ideal factors (1958a, 1958d, 1978a, 1978b). Freud's political stance on *sexual repression* fluctuated: sometimes he sounded like a liberal who advocates easing social control over the individual to decrease his neuroses, at other times

6 The ambiguity of these social theories would seem the counterpart of Kuhn's 'competing articulations' of natural science paradigms (1962, p. 90). Kuhn, however, regards competing articulations as part of the breakdown phase that occurs when a natural science paradigm is confronted by an anomalous physical fact. But no major social science theory has ever been destroyed by a fact. It is more likely to decline because its audience changes, rendering its approach irrelevant to their current concerns. The ambiguity of a social theory, far from being part of its breakdown phase, is what helps to make it famous in the first place through the public controversy that surrounds its 'correct' articulation and interpretation.

like a conservative who advocates maintaining or even increasing control over the individual to curb his more destructive drives (1962, 1963).

If ambiguity can stimulate teachers to try to synthesize a social theory, incompleteness can motivate researchers to try to amplify it.⁷ Had each classical social theorist exhausted the implications of his fundamental factor, as some classical philosophers exhausted theirs, one could only admire the theory, not add to it. But researchers can now show how his fundamental factor has affected areas of human life uninvestigated by the theorist himself, preferably those that further undermine the individual or the society or something else currently valued. Neo-Marxists can show how *capitalism* oppresses ever new groups, from the second sex to the third world. Neo-Durkheimians can show how the *division of labour* separates and interconnects the macro-world of political economy by forcing entire countries to specialize, or how quasi-sacred rituals of deference and demeanour revitalize the micro-world of human interaction. Neo-Weberians can show how computer match-ups have *rationalized* even something so personal as interpersonal dating relations, or how even child care today has become bureaucratized. Neo-Simmelians can show how individual defend themselves against such overwhelming *supra-individual entities* as small group coalitions or entire intellectual disciplines like sociology itself. Neo-Freudians can show how *sexual repression* has displaced erotic desires from their direct fulfillment to political substitutes like fascism or commercial ones like Fords.

Thus their essential equivocality and open-endedness make the sociological classics more like those in the humanities than like those in the natural sciences. Frank Kermode locates the distinguishing feature of humanities classics in

an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under varying [interpretations]... a plurality of significances from which... every reader misses some and... prefers one....

Consequently (as opposed to what I have called the specialist conception of the classics),

this pluralism... denies the... authoritarian reading that insists on the identity with the intention of the author... The survival of the classic must... depend upon its possession of a surplus of signifier... , for [it] must always signify more than is needed by any one interpreter or any one generation of interpreters. [1983, pp. 44, 133, 138, 140.]

7 The application of a theory in multi-paradigm social science differs greatly from its application in uni-paradigm natural science. Natural scientists, engaged in what Kuhn calls 'normal science', only 'solve puzzles', applying their theories inside an already defined range of topics to fill in the blanks like support troops who 'mop up' behind battle lines (1962, pp. 23-42). Social scientists, however, are more likely to try to extend their theory into new territory like the forward troops of a conquering army.

Regarding the sociological classics as humanistic rather than scientific texts permits us to see the value of what we would otherwise see as a defect.

CONCLUSION

To become a classic, then, it is not enough for a social theory to be merely true; it must also be seductive. Those who wrote classic social theory in the past, I have tried to show, followed a specific rhetorical programme that spoke to their audience's common concerns: (1) They posited a novel factor that has affected many aspects of modern society, surprising those unaware that the many effects they had experienced were produced by a single cause. (2) They compared modern society with previous or other societies unaffected by this factor to enhance their audience's appreciation of its temporal or spatial uniqueness. (3) They showed how this factor has subverted aspects of both individuals and society that their audience valued. (4) They played up their audience's fears by pointing out how its pernicious effects have spread into more and more areas of life. But (5) they left their audience with hope by suggesting ways to control or at least live with this factor. (6) Their theory was multi-layered enough to appeal to those at different levels of sophistication: its simple surface of easily remembered famous concepts gave generalists the feeling of being at least acquainted with the theory, its subtle core of complex relations gave specialists the challenge of puzzling them out. (7) The ambiguity of their social theory allowed different groups to support it, and permitted teachers to synthesize it (artificially if necessarily) for their students. (8) Its incompleteness prompted researchers to demonstrate how its fundamental factor has affected new areas of society, especially those in which they could uncover unsuspected damage to human nature or social processes.

Having induced these rules of classic rhetoric, let me immediately qualify their generality to answer to objection that a different selection of classic social theorists might produce different rhetorical rules. To prove the steps in this formula are *necessary* would require analyzing social theorists who do *not* fit this formula but who are nevertheless regarded as classics. For instance, Anglo-American social theorists—Spencer, Cooley, Mead, Dewey, Parsons—seem to follow a different rhetorical formula since their key factors do not eviscerate the individual nor enervate modern society. To prove the steps in this formula are *sufficient* would require analyzing social theorists who do fit the formula but who are *not* regarded as classics. For instance, although we can find many (in some cases, all) of the above steps in the rhetoric of Comte, Tocqueville, Toennies, Tarde and Pareto, they are still regarded as lesser theorists than Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Freud—implying the classic five's rhetoric contains further features omitted from the

lesser five's rhetoric. Consequently, I want to leave open the possibility that there are other sociological rhetorics (perhaps equally effective) or further steps in the classical rhetoric (perhaps equally essential).

If we turn to contemporary social theory, we can see why 'they don't write classics like they used to'. Contemporary social theorists no longer follow the classical rhetorical programme in part because they do not know what it is and in part because they do not believe contemporary audiences still share the same concerns as previous audiences. This is not to say that no contemporary social theory follows the classical rhetorical format. Contemporary social theorists have posited at least one unobvious unique fundamental factor whose effects pervade modern society that was not anticipated by the classical social theorists: the communication media.

Of the many discussions of macro-communications, Marshall McLuhan's comes closest to the classic form. He describes in detail how the new mass media have changed important, numerous and often unsuspected aspects of modern society, especially its members' world view. He compares the electronic medium, particularly television, that has begun to dominate modern Western society with the print medium that dominated the previous society, and with the oral tradition that had dominated primitive societies (and which is still found in certain non-Western societies). Like Marx's eschatological view of history, he hopes the new electronic medium will reunify the individual fragmented by the old print medium, and revitalize the society devitalized by it. His theory is both packed with easily remembered clichés ('the medium is the message') and contorted with hard-to-grasp complexity, and seems almost deliberately designed to be ambiguous and incomplete. All this has continued to inspire a dedicated band of disciples to try to understand his subtleties, integrate his scattered ideas, and discover new areas of society affected by the media (1962, 1965).

Yet few would rank McLuhan in the same league as Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel or Freud. Although he often brilliantly elaborates the consequences of his fundamental factor, the factor itself is anathema to many intellectuals and social scientists who regard television as merely kitsch. Despite using many components of the classical rhetorical programme, then, McLuhan's failure to establish a more unqualified reputation implies there must be elements of a social theory's exposition that hinder it from becoming classic as well as those that facilitate it. The low esteem of a theory's fundamental factor would be one element of this negative rhetoric. Theories that explain society based on low status ('cynical') fundamental factors (money, sex, TV) antagonize more of their audience than those based on neutral or high status ones (the division of labour, supra-individual entities, rationality). Consequently, a social theory whose rhetoric contains both strongly positive and

strongly negative elements will polarize its audience, engendering a more emotionally charged kind of controversy than does the merely ambiguous social theory discussed above. If controversies over correct interpretation enhance the theorist's reputation, controversies over correct evaluation may diminish it. Although an evaluative controversy may hinder a social theorist's reputation in the short run, it may facilitate it in the long run. The reputation of social theories (like Marx's or Freud's) that have been subject to both types of controversies rose more slowly during the early phases of their classic trajectory, but rose higher during the later phases.

The writing of classics in social theory has performed a crucial function for sociology. Donald Levine (in Rhea 1981, p. 63) has pointed out that they serve as common symbols for all sociologists, allowing each to conceive of his or her research projects as part of a communal enterprise. The sociological classics have become almost the sole centripetal force that hold together an increasingly centrifugal field.

Unfortunately, fewer sociologists understand their common concerns today, threatening to disintegrate a discipline whose integration is already precarious. To keep the field together, then, specialists in social theory must continually try to refresh the way every generation of generalists understands the meaning and unity of its classics.

But continuing to rely on its previous classics may no longer be enough to maintain sociology's integrity and viability. To keep the field together in the future sociology needs intellectual entrepreneurs to write new classics that will speak to contemporary audience concerns. I hope my attempt to show the common rhetorical programme that previous classics followed will persuade the reader that it could be updated, that 'contemporary classic' need not be merely an oxymoron but something he or she could conceivably aspire to write.

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