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The Rhetoric of the Canon: Functional, Historicist, and Humanist Justifications

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Abstract
This paper seeks to uncover the modes of justification by which sociological theorists legitimize the "canon" of sociological theory in practice, through the stories they tell to students in sociological theory textbooks. Specifically, we ask: how do textbook authors rationalize their decisions to include and exclude some theorists? Further, what are the modes or "rules of the conceptual game" underlying these justifications? To address these questions, we undertake a rhetorical examination of a corpus of 250 English-language editions of sociological theory textbooks. Focusing on their Introductions and Conclusions, we highlight texts that presume the canon is a social fact and investigate the justifications they provide for assenting to this fact. We articulate and illustrate three forms of legitimation: functionalist, historicist, and humanist. Functionalist justifications legitimate the canon by appealing to its capacity to generate disciplinary unity and integrity. Historicist justifications legitimate the canon by appealing to its members' foundational and influential role in defining the direction of the field. Humanist justifications legitimate the canon through appealing to the intrinsic qualities of its texts and authors. Identifying these pathways is the primary empirical contribution of this paper, which in turn contributes to the collective project of disciplinary self-reflection.

Keywords Social theory · History of Sociological Thought · Textbooks · Rhetoric

Introduction

Sociological writing as a genre is marked by a high degree of reflexivity about its objects, methods, and theoretical reference points. This has led to contentious debates over who and what to study and for what reasons. Sociologists routinely

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critically appraise what theories and theorists we ought to value, examine, and teach. By engaging in collective discussions over the value and composition of a 'canon' of 'founders', the discipline generates social facts about its topics and boundaries. These facts in turn create demands to legitimize them to new entrants into the field: why focus attention on a small group of theorists who lived and wrote around the turn of the twentieth century? Why these theorists and not others?

In this paper, we seek to uncover the modes of justification by which sociological theorists legitimize the "canon" of sociological theory in practice, through the stories they tell to students in sociological theory textbooks. Specifically, we ask: how do textbook authors rationalize their decisions to include and exclude some theorists? Further, what are the modes or "rules of the conceptual game" underlying these justifications?

To address these questions, we undertake a rhetorical examination of 250 editions of English-language sociological theory textbooks. Focusing on their Introductions and Conclusions, we highlight texts that presume the canon is a social fact and investigate the justifications they provide for assenting to this fact. We articulate and illustrate three forms of legitimation: functionalist, historicist, and humanist. Functionalist justifications legitimate the canon by appealing to its capacity to generate disciplinary unity and integrity. Historicist justifications legitimate the canon by appealing to its members' foundational and influential role in defining the direction of the field. Humanist justifications legitimate the canon through appealing to the intrinsic qualities of its texts and authors.

These modes of justification are embedded in logics defined by characteristic problems and solutions. Problems define the motivations for offering a justification, whereas solutions define what would count as a convincing legitimation. Functionalist narratives are often troubled by the problem of representation: if the canon exists to sustain disciplinary unity, but it excludes important traditions or identities, then it fails to live up to its promise. To solve this problem, authors often pluralize their narratives, thereby expanding the canon so that it appeals to an increasingly diverse field. Historicist narratives face the problem of relevance: if the canon is defined by its members' historical role in founding a discipline that happened somewhere between one and two centuries ago, this places the relevance of such texts for contemporary concerns into serious doubt. To solve this problem, authors tend to advance genealogical narratives that trace features of the discipline's current intellectual, professional, or normative situation to their origins in the classical period. Humanist justifications, finally, face the challenge of externality: for the humanist, classical theorists must be understood in their own terms, via the internal logic of their own texts. External accounts of the meaning of classical ideas, whether grounded in historical context or disciplinary integration, are inherently problematic from this point of view, and the humanistic author must be on guard against letting them intrude. To solve this problem, humanists articulate hermeneutic narratives, defined by exposition and articulation of the inner potential of each theorist's ideas. If functionalists and historicists solve the problem of the canon by "inclusion" and "genealogy" respectively, humanists do so through "hermeneutics."

Although many textbooks treat the existence of the sociological canon as an unavoidable social fact, in others the problem simply does not arise. This is not to say that such textbooks ignore Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Wollstonecraft, Simmel, Martineau, Mead, Du Bois, or any other potentially canonized figure. Rather, these textbooks do not organize the field of sociological theory around close study of particular theorists understood to be foundational classics. We examine such textbooks as well, to understand the logics by which they avoid the problem of the canon.

Key contributions of this study are threefold. Our primary contribution is new empirical knowledge for the research literature on the practice and teaching of sociological theory, by elaborating and illustrating the logics by which authors justify a theoretical canon. The second and third contributions are interrelated: our findings advance disciplinary self-reflection about the formal structures by which the field reproduces and legitimates itself. In doing so, our findings also offer a basis for additional historical, rhetorical, and comparative research into the formation and legitimation of sociological canons. The discussion and conclusion elaborate the significance of these contributions and make some suggestions regarding how to pursue them.

Sociology, the Problem of the Canon, and the Empirics of Sociological Theory

Academic fields often organize themselves around a "canon" of knowledge, methods, or texts that underpin a discipline and define their self-conception (Baehr, 2002; How, 2016). Who or what is in an academic canon routinely becomes a source of tension, as does the very question of why we have canons at all (Bastedo et al., 2016). Debates not only concern what kind of research to reward, but also how and what students should learn.

A large literature has investigated and debated the value and significance of a "canon" of sociological theorists. In this literature, the sociological canon tends to refer to a small group of authors and texts that most sociologists can be expected to have read, typically as a result of having to study them in required courses (Guzman & Silver, 2018). This institutionalized obligation is what lends the term "canon" its weight, referring to a sanctioned set of texts accepted by recognized authorities, despite some key differences from canonization in the context of the history of Christianity (Baehr, 2002). In sociology, moreover, the canon is composed of "classical theorists" thought to have "founded" the field and elaborated its main theoretical paradigms, amidst considerable controversy around what this means (Alexander, 1989; Baehr, 2002; Barlösius, 2004; Holzhauser, 2021; How, 2016; Levine, 2015; Poggi, 1996; Stinchcombe, 1982). In any case, the classics – rather than a methodology or topic or "standard model" – are often conceived as providing for sociology writ large the "cognitive stability of the discipline" (Joas & Knöbl, 2009, p. 604), justifying their institutionalization as a canon. For some, the canon represents the discipline's identity, but for others, this also means it becomes a prescriptive and exclusionary force that pushes non-canonical voices to the margins (Von Hallberg, 1984).

Though "the classics" might not have understood themselves as "theorists" in their day, after they became interpreted as such (Bargheer, 2017), the sub-field of sociological theory became perhaps the key disciplinary location in which highly general debates about the nature and purpose of the discipline could take place. These arguments involve not only what authors to include in required sociological theory courses, but also the narratives about the field in which the authors are embedded (Guzman et al., 2021; Levine, 2015; Owens, 2015). Such debates have made the sociological theory course a key research site for studying the composition and characteristics of the sociological canon. Thus, while sociologists routinely discuss and debate the sociological theory course informally and in research settings (Collins, 1997; Connell, 1997; Curato, 2013; Go, 2020; Guillory, 1987; Mouzelis, 1997), they have also increasingly turned sociological theory into an empirical research object in its own right. Educational tools like compendia (Barlösius, 2004; Holzhauser, 2021), course catalogs (Döpking, 2016), syllabi (Grauerholz & Gibson, 2006; Guzman & Silver, 2018) and textbooks (Alway, 1995; Connell, 1997; Guzman et al., 2021; Hall, 1988, 2000; Hamilton, 2003; Mallory & Cormack, 2018; Manza et al., 2010) provide material for empirically determining the existence (or not) of a canon, which theorists and texts makes it up, how it has changed over time, and how it may vary across different national boundaries.

This research stream has generated considerable knowledge about the existence and constitution of the sociological canon (Alway, 1995; Hamilton, 2003; Mallory & Cormack, 2018; McDonald, 2019). For example, Guzman and Silver (2018) examined some 260 theory syllabi across all Canadian research universities, as well as demographics and research interests of 87% of all Canadian theory instructors (in comparison to a similarly large sample of sociology instructors writ large). They found that all but two universities require a theory course, that 45% of all theory syllabi include texts by Marx, Weber, or Durkheim (followed by a steep drop off), and that 85% of classical theory courses (almost always mandatory) include these three authors. Moreover, Anglophone Canadian departments exhibited substantially greater consolidation around the Marx-Weber-Durkheim triad, in contrast to their Francophone counterparts. Despite the clear qualitative difference between the "Big 3" and all other authors, classical theory courses also reveal that the canon is not closed. Most courses included Marx-Weber-Durkheim plus a small handful of others, usually a subset of Simmel, Mead, Martineau, Du Bois, Gilman, or Comte.[1] Research has also emphasized the Eurocentric character of the canon, most notably Connell's (1997) seminal study of over 100 English-language textbooks from 1896–1996.[2] Others have considered national traditions and general characteristics in organization and contents in British and French textbooks (Schrecker, 2008). Survey research has sought to reveal "the subjective canon" and

[1] The process by which a new author enters into this extended canon involves a form of intellectual activism (Frickel & Gross, 2005) worthy of additional study. For the case of Simmel, see Broćić and Silver (2021).

[2] See also Alway (1995) for a more recent examination of the gendered character of approximately 10 English-language theory textbooks, and a recent 2019 study by McDonald.

what informs inclusion and exclusion therein (Lenger et al., 2014; Gerhards, 2014), finding for example that Weber, Luhmann, and Bourdieu are most popular among German sociology students while Weber, Marx, Bourdieu, Luhmann, Parsons, and Durkheim are the most widely known.

Taken as a whole, this research has demonstrated that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim have come to constitute the core of a canon especially in Anglophone sociology: they are institutionally required reading for nearly any card-carrying sociologist.[3] Less widespread are international comparisons and longitudinal studies into the constitution of the canon and concern with the concept of "canon" itself. To this end, Guzman et al. (2021) conducted the most systematic cross-national analysis of some 570 editions of textbooks from 1950 to 2020 in English, French and German, finding, among other things, that Marx-Weber-Durkheim predominate especially in the English-language context, whereas in the French and German contexts Durkheim or Weber (respectively) have a more singular position, standing alone atop the hierarchy of theorists in their national contexts. The concentration of Marx-Weber-Durkheim in the English language context peaked in the 1980s, before textbook authors expanded their attention somewhat in recent years, as the core "Big 3" became surrounded by a penumbra of additional theorists (Simmel, Mead, Du Bois, etc.). Figure 1 adds by documenting the use of the terms "classic," "classics," and "canon" over the same period.

Figure 1 shows that, while the term 'classic' remains most common throughout, 'canon' has continued to grow in popularity, nearly doubling its representation in English textbooks since the 1950s, peaking in the 1990s and rebounding in the 2010s after a drop-off in the 2000s to a point where its usage is similar to the term "classics." Overall, the literature makes clear that English-language sociological generally exhibits a high degree of concentration around a small number of authors. In addition, even as that overall concentration has waned to some degree, discussion of the concept of "the canon" (including problematizing and challenging that notion) continues apace. In sum, "the canon" exists as a social fact in Anglophone sociology, both as a small set of institutionally sanctioned authors and texts and as a regular topic around which discussion and debate is organized.

[3] Clearly, few sociologists deeply engage with these authors' entire oeuvres; canonization is not just of authors but of texts. We are not aware of systematic examination of the prevalence of specific texts in syllabi, but information compiled on opensyllabus.org suggests a canonization that would likely be familiar to most sociologists. For Weber, syllabi tend to feature *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, selections from *Economy and Society* (often "Class, Status, and Party" and "Basic Sociological Concepts"), and the "Intermediate Reflections" from *The Sociology of Religion*. For Durkheim, syllabi tend to feature selections from *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, *The Division of Labour*, and *Suicide*, along with the discussion of social facts in the *Rules of Sociological Method*. For Marx, typical readings include *The Communist Manifesto*, the discussion of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the opening sections of *Capital*, and selections from *The German Ideology*, with the *Marx-Engels Reader* guiding many instructors.

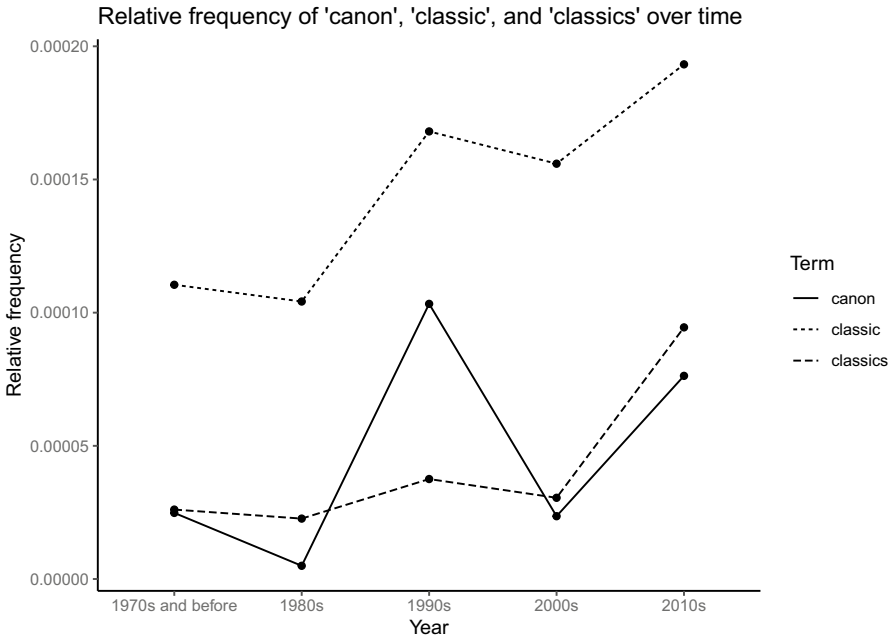


Fig. 1 The use of the term 'canon', 'classic', and 'classics' since the 1950s. *Note:* This figure shows the relative frequency of the terms "canon," "classic," and "classics" in English textbooks over time. The analysis is based on the 209 editions in our corpus for which we acquired digital versions. Relative frequencies are calculated with the R package "quanteda."

The Rhetoric of Social Science

While this past and ongoing empirical work has catalogued the existence and composition of the canon, it has rarely if at all qualitatively examined the forms of argumentation and reasoning by which authors justify this reduction of a highly complex and fluid field. Filling this gap and adding to the empirical knowledge in this research literature is accordingly the primary contribution of this paper. Identifying these logics of justification is vital, moreover, for disciplinary self-understanding of the structures within which sociologists operate: structures do not float freely by themselves, they are the expression of practices (Giddens, 1984). In the case of intellectual structures such as sociological theory, the central practices are rhetorical; they consist of writing and reading (Bazerman, 1988; Van Maanen, 2011). Therefore, to extend the aforementioned literature and contribute to the collective project of sociology's self-understanding, we aim to identify mechanisms that sustain or change the practice of sociological theory via a rhetorical analysis of sociological theory textbooks. Specifically, we examine how textbook authors justify to their readers their perpetuation of or deviation from the traditional canon of sociological theory, leaving aside in the present context the related and important question of how the canon was created (the conclusion briefly returns to this issue). We

take inspiration from the general literature on rhetoric and the rhetoric of science, as well as the specialized literature on the rhetoric of social research.

Rhetorical analysis of texts investigates how authors seek to persuade their readers. "Rhetoric" in this sense does not refer to "merely" rhetorical efforts to trick audiences into believing falsehoods (Jasper & Young, 2007). Rather, rhetorical analysis begins from the observation that writing is a social act involving authors and audiences and asks by what textual means writers convince their audiences of the truth, goodness, or beauty of their statements (Edmondson, 2007). Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is the classical source, famously distinguishing between "logos" – the argument itself, geared toward the constraints and opportunities of its audience – "ethos" – characteristics of the speaker or writer that make their argument more or less persuasive – and "pathos" – the emotional responses of the audience that make a given argument more or less likely to succeed (Aristotle, 2018). These classical distinctions have retained their value, even as they have been questioned, modified, and extended (Holland, 2018).

While classical rhetoric tended to examine public oration, contemporary rhetorical studies have cast their net more widely to incorporate scientific texts, including social science (Hunter, 1990). All aspects of such texts have potential rhetorical significance, from title pages to tables of contents and end notes. Researchers find intriguing differences in rhetorical practice of qualitative vs. quantitative research (Firestone, 1987; Gusfield, 2017), while others identify how sociologists use devices such as metaphor, irony, and paradox (Brown, 1978; Bruyn, 1964; Gusfield, 2017). Van Maanen (2011), for example, catalogs various genre conventions in ethnographic writing, with a special emphasis on how ethnographic writers create the impression of reality in their subject matter. Bazerman's (1988) seminal work compared sociological, humanistic, and natural scientific writing. He suggests that the former, as exemplified by Robert Merton's famous essay in the sociology of science, operates without shared background assumptions with its readers regarding the nature and importance of the phenomenon to be studied, which the writer must self-reflexively establish. This puts sociological writers in the difficult rhetorical position of needing to establish the value of their topic in addition to and before they can prove something about it.

Sociological theory textbook authors find themselves in a similarly challenging rhetorical situation. They are writing for at least three audiences: students who will learn from their book, other professors who will assign and teach it, and publishers who will purchase and reprint it (Manza et al., 2010). Students come to the field with little background knowledge about sociological theory, and need to be convinced of its significance to them as budding professionals and academics, as well as human beings curious about the social world and the big ideas sociology has to offer for making sense out of it. Professors require texts that enable them to distill complex ideas into relatively manageable units which, especially in the American case, can be taught in a single semester course on social theory. Temporal real estate is scarce (Abrutyn, 2013) and justification for choosing one approach to teaching over another is crucial. They also have expectations about the evolving state and value of the theory field itself, which a textbook author must also take into consideration. Publishers seek safe bets that have proven their worth in the past, tending to reproduce ways of dividing the field that may not

correspond to current research practice. Manza et al. (2010), for example, show that introductory general sociology textbooks display great inertia, often carving the field into functionalist, conflict, and interactionist paradigms, even as contemporary practitioners rarely conceive the field this way.

The creative act of the author involves somehow triangulating these audiences to solve the communicative problems inhering in this rhetorical situation. In the case of sociological theory in North America, the "canon" poses the central dilemma. The canon as we know it – the "Big 3" of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – consolidated in the early 1970s, as continental Europe displaced the United States as the focal point for sociological theorizing (Guzman et al., 2021). This left the role of the professional academic "theorist" in an increasingly precarious situation (Lamont, 2004; Lizardo, 2020). Structurally, the "classical" and "contemporary" course sequence "solved" this problem, at least temporarily, by providing a stable demand for at least one or two academic theorists in any sociology department. Culturally, Anthony Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (Giddens, 1971) played a key role in arguing that sociological perspectives on industrial capitalism and modernity could be distilled into three orientations represented by each member of the Holy Trinity. The Big 3 also conveniently satisfied Collins' "law of small numbers" (Collins, 2009), which sets the attention space of active schools of thought or great authors at three to six, with Marx standing as the revolutionary contrast to Weber and Durkheim. Whatever the precise mechanisms, a complex field became streamlined into a semester classical theory course (Outhwaite, 2009) that could be more easily summarized, packaged, and sold in textbooks, taught by specialists and non-specialists alike, and delivered in a digestible and memorable way to students.

In English-speaking sociology, "classical theory" thereafter became "the Big 3" plus a few "others" that vary across syllabi, while "contemporary sociology" considers a more flexible series of schools or paradigms (Guzman & Silver, 2018). A similar trend appears in English textbooks since the 1950s, where "the Big 3" continuously appears together with various other thinkers (Guzman et al., 2021). Once canonized, "the Big 3" became the target for efforts to change the disciplinary identity inculcated in classical theory courses and textbooks, sometimes by "expanding the canon" to incorporate neglected voices (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2006; Reckwitz, 2002), contextualizing it (Owens, 2015), or rejecting it (Connell, 1997). The "theory textbook" became an object of controversy. On one more "positivist" flank, commentators critique the field's overly historicist and humanist concern with rehashing the ideas of past greats in contrast to a more scientific effort to distill models and propositions (Rojas, 2017; Sanderson, 2015). On another, authors highlight the legacy of imperialism, Eurocentrism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racial hierarchies, with the narrow focus on a few "dead white men" in sociological theory raising persistent questions of how narrow representation by gender, race, and nationality diminishes the range of ideas discussed (Go, 2020).

This is the rhetorical puzzle sociological textbook authors must solve. The canon is at once deeply entrenched as a source of professional disciplinary identity, a safe publishing bet, and a tried-and-true vehicle for exciting (some) students about the potential of sociology to speak to the great questions of capitalist modernity. At the same time, the canon is controversial, even divisive. How do they square this

rhetorical circle? How do they justify continuing to teach the canon, or moving beyond it? What enables some to ignore the question, but leaves others unable to do so?

Methods and Data

Rather than seek to adjudicate ongoing debates about the canon, we elaborate some of the typical argumentative strategies by which the textbook authors themselves address these questions. In this language game, there are a relatively small number of moves. Depending on how one defines "the problem of the canon" and its range of appropriate solutions, various issues can become intractable dilemmas or fail to arise at all. To identify key argumentative strategies, we examine a corpus of theory textbooks that grapple with this problem explicitly, and lay out various ways of defining it as problematic and seeking to resolve or diffuse it.

Following prior research (Alway, 1995; Collins, 1997; Mallory & Cormack, 2018; McDonald, 2019; Platt, 2008), we use textbooks as a window into an academic field. Textbooks constitute a tractable object of analysis to consider the structure, production, and evolution of sociology as a discipline. However, while textbooks play a substantial role in the English sociology context, they are not the only way professors teach theory. Many also rely on monographs or a selection of primary texts. In their study of Canadian theory syllabi, Guzman and Silver (2018) found that about half used a textbook. Nevertheless, Guzman and Silver (2018) also found that even when instructors taught without a textbook, they still assigned and structured their course around the same canonical figures and 'classic' texts. Thus, while we cannot rule out the possibility that instructors who do not use textbooks justify their reading selections in very different ways than do textbooks, the available evidence points toward substantial similarity in what they ultimately choose. In any case, some caution is warranted in making generalizations to all theory instructors, even if textbooks nevertheless offer one of the best available sites to observe the modes of justifying teaching choices in situ.

Our primary data source in this study is a corpus of English sociological theory textbooks, written between 1950 and 2019. 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 directed to sociology students being introduced in courses to sociological theory. This definition includes mass market textbooks (e.g. Ritzer's *Sociological Theory*), written versions of lectures (e.g. Joas and Knöbl's *Social Theory),* and detailed reviews of the field and its different traditions geared toward introducing or inculcating students to it (e.g. Michel Lallement's *History of Sociological Ideas*).[4] To compile this corpus,

[4] As noted above, textbooks triangulate between at least three audiences: students, professors, and publishers. The relative weight varies, and in some cases the line is not clear between a book for students or geared toward changing professors' ideas about how to think about theory or teaching theory. On borderline cases, we tended to err on inclusion, confirming that a candidate book appears on syllabi gathered

we entered search terms like "Sociological Theory," "Social Theory," "History of Sociological Thought," and "Foundations of Sociology" into our university library database.[5] To this initial candidate list, we added more from the WorldCat database. We then narrowed the list to books oriented to students and accessed digital copies where possible. Where this was not possible, we checked out physical books from university libraries.

The resulting corpus includes 250 editions of English-language textbooks, of which we acquired 209 digital versions. Textbooks can have several editions associated to one title. We therefore examined all available editions of a textbook, since there can be important adjustments made between editions and over time, including the inclusion of additional chapters that point to new concerns within the field. Given trends in academic publishing toward increasing numbers and editions of texts, the corpus is naturally skewed toward more recent years. Nearly 80% of editions in our corpus were published since 1990 and nearly 30% since 2010. Hence, our analysis features the period when the canon was strongest, both in terms of concentration around a small number of theorists and as a topic of discourse. Even so, we supplement this core analysis in the Discussion & Conclusion with a brief discussion of earlier textbooks.

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of this corpus of English textbooks, primarily based on their Prefaces, Introductions, Conclusions, framing chapters on the nature and origins of sociological theory, and tables of contents. Heeding recent critiques and arguments about coding (see Biernacki, 2012; Lee & Martin, 2015; Martin, 2017), we use quantitative information through text analysis as a concrete means to contextualize our qualitative analysis while eschewing definitive quantitative statements regarding the prevalence of one or the other rhetorical logic discussed below. Our qualitative analysis was supported by Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. We uploaded all digitally-available prefaces, introductions, and conclusions to allow for us to tag key argumentative styles in the texts and compile notes from careful reading of the texts. The tags evolved as we examined the corpus in more detail. We also read and took notes on the 41 editions for which only physical copies were available. Throughout, we noted recurrent themes and forms of

Footnote 4 (continued)
in opensyllabus.org. For example, Martin's *Thinking Through Theory* and Swedberg's *The Art of Social Theory* (both discussed below) might reasonably be thought to have professional theorists among their central audiences. Nevertheless, *The Art of Social Theory* appears in 38 syllabi, *Thinking Through Theory* in 9, and each is co-assigned with common texts in sociological theory courses, such as Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, or Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Even so, a limitation of our study is that our corpus is not a complete census and there is no bright line between what is and is not a "textbook.".

[5] Sociological theory and social theory can have distinct meanings, which are often debated by theorists. In practice, however, Guzman and Silver (2018) found that sociological theory courses often assign textbooks that are titled with either term. Some even include both in the same title, such as Allan's *Social and Sociological Theory*. Many books with "social theory" in their titles deal explicitly with the history of sociology and engage prominently with sociologists. For our purposes, the abstract distinction is less relevant than whether a textbook is geared towards sociology students and is assigned in sociology courses.

reasoning, paying special attention to changing emphases in books across multiple editions, which help to reveal how authors adjust argumentative logics to the changing demands of their perceived audiences.

We treated our notes and tags as aids toward developing our impressions of core rhetorical tropes used by textbook authors as we worked toward our overall interpretation of the data. While our central research questions, following the literature discussed above, concern the logics by which textbook authors explicitly justify their use of a canon, we were mindful to avoid assuming that all texts conceptualize their task in canonical terms. Therefore, we also investigated rhetorical patterns in textbooks that eschew discussion of the canon (see Fig. 2 and the section on "Avoiding the Problem" below). Through this process, we gained confidence that we had identified the major ways of formulating problems and solutions of the problem of the canon. We synthesized and compiled this material and draw on particularly illuminating examples to illustrate the general forms of argumentation we found.

Canon as Social Fact

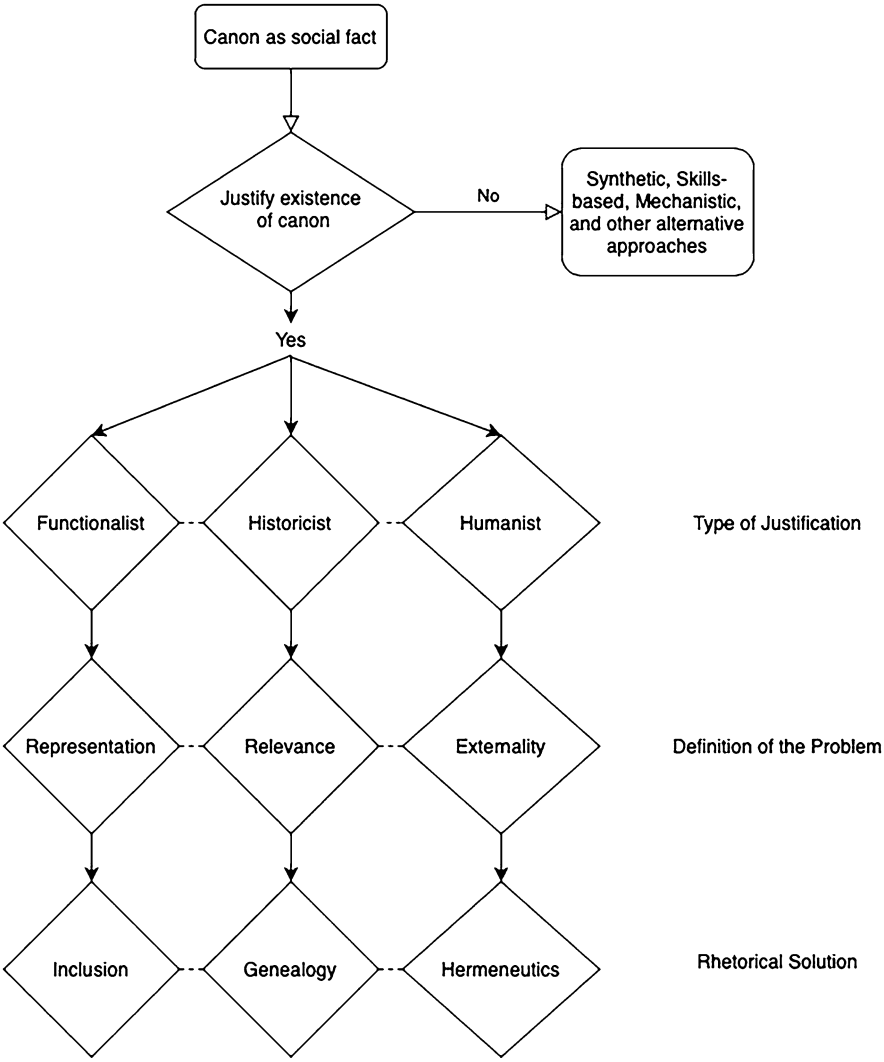
Especially after the 1980s, textbooks more frequently treat the canon as a social fact. The regular use of terms such as "Holy Trinity," "Big 3," or "founding fathers" and, as Fig. 1 shows, the phrase "the canon" itself serve as a case in point. Together, they convey that, whatever the author's own opinions, the Marx, Weber, Durkheim triumvirate objectively exists, and no introduction to sociological theory could responsibly avoid that fact. In texts organized around this principle, confrontation with these three men must first be established before any other discussions take place.

Textbook authors are, however, rarely content to rest their discussion on the mere fact that the canon exists. Instead, they offer *reasons* for its centrality and for requiring students to read this small group of German and French authors who lived and worked over a century ago. We first identify three basic logics of justifying the existence of the canon: *functionalist*, where the canon serves disciplinary purposes; *historicist*, where the canon represents the legacy of a founding moment; and *humanist*, where the canon contains the greatest works of sociological theory. Then for each logic we elaborate why from that perspective the canon poses a problem: for functionalist justifications, the canon raises the problem of *representation*; historicist explanations face the problem of *relevance*; and humanist explanations must confront the problem of *externality*.

At the same time, for each definition of the problem, we identify ideal–typical rhetorical solutions authors propose to remedy them. Functionalist logics generally solve the problem of representation by *including* new members considered to be conducive to disciplinary integrity; historicist explanations solve the problem of relevance by developing *genealogical* narratives that connect the present to the past; humanist explanations solve the problem of externality through *hermeneutical* interpretation that articulate the inner depth and scope of classic texts.

Figure 2 summarizes the overall rhetorical situation and represents an analytical reconstruction of logically consistent pathways through the rhetorical

Fig. 2 The Rhetoric of the Canon



Note: this figure summarizes the overall rhetorical situation of Anglophone sociological theory textbooks. The primary question is whether a textbook considers the canon to be a social fact requiring justification. If the answer is yes, then some justification is required. Justifications generate their own characteristic problems and solutions, indicated by the downward pathways. If the answer is no, then alternative conceptualizations of sociological theory become possible. Dotted lines indicate the possibility of mixing and overlapping across rhetorical pathways.

problem–solution space of the sociological canon. In practice, these pathways are often combined. We do not claim that these constitute the complete set of rhetorical logics in this domain, though we do believe that they capture the typical rhetorical postures taken by textbook authors regarding the problem of the canon. Figure 2 also includes a pathway for those textbooks that do not consider it important to treat

the canon as a social fact in need of justification, which we discuss below under the heading "Avoiding the Problem."

Justifying the Canon

Functionalist explanations for teaching the canon are found in a number of textbooks. By a functionalist explanation, we mean an explanation that attributes the canon's enduring place in the field to its consequences. Often the consequence in question is disciplinary unity and integrity. As Bratton and Denham (2019) remark: "The canon provides a shared language, a focus, some kind of identity for the discipline, and it shapes both the intellectual discourse and the trajectory of social research". (p.xii). In some cases, this type of explanation leads authors to defend the traditional canon, not in terms of the inherent quality of the ideas its members offer, but strictly in terms of their institutional value:

> in our view…it is right (or at least not wrong) to cast a select group of intellectuals as the core writers in the discipline; and yes, this is, to an extent, the canonization of a few dead, white, European men…Marx, Weber, and Durkheim…are not inherently better or more original than those of other intellectuals who wrote before or after them…for specific historical, social, and cultural reasons, their works helped define the discipline, and…sociologists refine, rework, and challenge their ideas to this day. (Appelrouth & Edles, 2010, p. 5)

For strong functionalist explanations, questions of the quality of ideas take a back seat to questions of institutional order.[6] In other cases, critics attribute the canon's centrality to its role in perpetuating the hegemony of European conceptions of modernity, as well as the domination of white males over the field.

> The dominant account of the development of sociological theory would have us believe that it was only Western European and later North American white males in the nineteenth and early twentieth century who thought in a creative and systematic manner about the origins and nature of the emerging modernity of their time…There is...a 'universal' acceptance that anyone, anywhere who wants to study sociology must 'know' the writings of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. (Alatas & Sinha, 2017, p. 1)

[6] Martin (2015) notes the circularity embedded in this conception: "Theory" is then a side effect of canonization. Durkheim has a "theory" because Durkheim was a theorist, and Durkheim was a theorist because we make everyone read Durkheim. Whether this is a result of his institutional machinations and the creation of a school, the result of his intrinsic excellence, or simply a historical accident, is a secondary matter (Martin, 2015, p. 3). Martin argues that this functionalist explanation is a stable but unsatisfying solution: stable, because it is simple and definitional, allowing some authors to be "in" or "out" of the category "theory" without making any invidious distinctions about quality or value; unsatisfying because its circularity threatens to make theory coterminous with sociology as such, leaving no room for an account of what the distinctiveness of "theory work" amounts to.

Alatas and Sinha notably do not recommend abandoning Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, pointing to their ongoing role in providing a common disciplinary identity and reference point. Instead, in line with the solutions we review below, they suggest that expanding the canon would preserve and even entrench its functional value by allowing members of a more diverse field to see themselves reflected in the basis of its shared identity. These examples illustrate one of the more common forms of justifying the ongoing reliance on the canon in sociological theory education.

Another set of textbooks eschew functionalist explanation and instead highlight *historicist* justifications for teaching the canon. By a historicist justification, we mean one that explains the value and composition of the canon in virtue of its members' foundational and influential role in defining the direction of the field at its outset. In this form of argumentation, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are not just players in early sociological thought, they are seen as the founding fathers of the discipline. In these approaches, to learn the canon is to uncover the character of the founding moment that has imprinted itself on what came thereafter.

> Beginnings are important in…theory dialogues; at least they are for people who draw lines to indicate who should be included in the sociology canon and who shouldn't. They work somewhat like the idea of 'founders' in the American discourse of democracy. Founders are used to define the purpose and delineate the goals and boundaries of an entity, as well as give legitimation to those purposes and goals. (Allan, 2013, p. 6)

Whereas the nature of functional explanations admits a degree of openness with respect to the historical period in which a potential member of the canon lived and worked, the historicist conception requires canonized theorists from the field's founding years with demonstrable influence on later generations:

> The period from roughly 1840 to 1920… represents sociology's classical period. The individuals associated with this era were responsible… even when they were not trying to do so, for giving sociology its initial identity. (Kivisto, 2003, p. xxii)

Ashley and Orenstein (2005) provide a particularly clear illustration of this conception, outlining four criteria for canonical inclusion: writing between 1789–1919; producing sufficiently general theory to have a wide impact across many sub-fields; attaining wide influence; and helping, directly or indirectly, to institutionalize the field. Applying these criteria leads Ashley and Orenstein to select twelve authors that:

> had one thing in common: they were male. Moreover, they were white males who were strongly influenced by European ideas. None were working class; none were female. (Ashley & Orenstein, 2005, p. 30)

While Ashley and Orenstein lament this outcome and reflect on the patterns of exclusion it reveals, they nevertheless maintain the value of studying the classical canon. Such is the power of genealogical justification.

A third justification of the social fact of the theoretical canon is more humanistic. By a humanistic justification, we mean one that refers the canonical status of theorists to the intrinsic quality of their ideas. In a humanistic conception, we require students to read the canon in order to confront them with the greatest expressions of the human effort to comprehend the social world. The works of these thinkers are seen as great texts that ought to be engaged with to get a 'proper' education in sociological thought. Callinicos (1999) offers a particularly forceful statement of humanism. Following Mouzelis (1997), for Callinocos, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim have produced writings that:

> judged by the standards of 'cognitive rationality'…are 'superior to other writings in terms of cognitive potency, analytical acuity, power of synthesis, imaginative reach and originality. (Callinicos, 1999, p. 8)

In this conception, we continue to read these authors so students can "familiarize themselves with the legacies of extraordinary minds" that offer "inspiring exemplars and models" (Poggi & Sciortino, 2011, p. 3). Humanistic strands are commonly linked with functional and genealogical explanations. For example, Tucker offers a predominantly genealogical approach that justifies the canon in virtue of its early formulation of "many of the fundamental themes of sociology." But nevertheless, he attributes to these authors "powerful insights which can help illuminate many social processes today" (Tucker, 2001, p. 3). While pure humanism is relatively rare, some version of the notion of "powerful insight" is often combined with historical influence and functional value in justifying the canon.

The Problems of the Canon, and Their Solutions

Explanations of the canon are loosely coupled with various *definitions of the problem* of canonization and their loosely coupled solutions. Functional explanations tend to be troubled by problems of *representation*. If the canon exists to bind the discipline of sociology into a unity, but it excludes important voices, interests, and identities, this is tantamount to marginalizing such voices, interests, and identities, and potentially a source of intra-disciplinary conflict and disintegration. Hence, adopting a functionalist justification of the canon tends to push authors to perpetually grapple with questions of "expanding" the canon, often to include in a shared disciplinary identity formerly marginalized groups or questions as they become more institutionally prominent. Thus, in their second edition, Bratton and Denham (2019) present a "more inclusive canon by including two neglected dimensions of the social world—gender and race respectively" via chapters on W.E.B. Du Bois and early feminist authors. Similar retrospective reappraisals in the name of inclusivity offer perhaps the most common solution to the problem of representation (p. 5). This complex of problems often issues in pluralistic narratives (Levine, 1995) of the field, in which no perspective or author is considered intrinsically superior to any other, and the movement of the field's growth is one of expanding and diversifying voices and points of view required to understand something as diverse and various as society itself.

Historicist explanations, by contrast, tend to be relatively at ease with the question of representation. Strict historicist explanations justify exclusion of women, racial minorities, and non-European authors from the canon through their lack of historical influence in the discipline's founding period, for better or worse. Nevertheless, historicist explanations easily accommodate a wider range of authors in historical accounts of challenges to and dialogues with the discipline's "founding figures." For example, Shilling and Mellor (2001) divide the field into "classical" and "post-classical" periods. They discuss the former in chapters devoted to single "founding" figures and the latter in diverse collections of authors under headings such as "feminist sociology," "racial sociology," or "post/modern sociology." Others make room for historically neglected "women founders" of the field (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2006; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020), or "expanded canons," arguing that new entrants were in fact influential participants in the intellectual dialogue of the field's founding moment, but were denied subsequent influence through the hierarchical character of the institutions that had emerged. In this way, historicist arguments readily "expand the canon" within the constraints imposed by that argumentative form, by adducing a genealogy of the foundation of the field in which figures like Martineau, Wollstonecraft, Cooper or Du Bois serve as additional "founders" who also shaped the definition of the field, even if this has not always been properly recognized.

Historicist explanations do, however, tend to attribute characteristic problems to canonization. The *problem of relevance*, in particular, can become especially troubling in a historicist conception. If the canon is defined by its members' historical role in a founding that happened somewhere between one and two centuries ago, this places the relevance of such texts for contemporary concerns into serious doubt. The world has changed, after all, and it might seem gratuitous to require students to read books for merely antiquarian reasons. While we might take steps toward solving the problem of representation by including an author like Martineau, the reflections of a mid-nineteenth century Victorian Englishwoman may nevertheless not seem much more relevant to the lives of twenty-first century American nineteen-year-olds than those of a mid-nineteenth century German revolutionary philosopher reflecting on the alienation of British factory workers.

Hence many historically oriented textbooks spend considerable time arguing for the contemporary relevance of canonical authors. The most consistent form of solution pursued by historicist authors is genealogical: they argue that the past is not in fact so distant and that our contemporary situation is illuminated through uncovering its historical sources. Miles' *Social Theory in the Real World* (Miles, 2001) offers a version of this sort of solution.

> The philosophy that lies behind this book is that classical theory remains of considerable value, but only where it relates to themes of contemporary social change which are best considered through the discussion of contemporary theoretical theme. (Miles, 2001, p. 3)

This type of solution requires the historicist to elaborate criteria of genealogical relevance, which often revolve around critical or normative claims to evaluating the present. For example, Tucker articulates a set of concerns that are in his view

"the most pressing issues of our time," (Tucker, 2001, p.4) to which, conveniently, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim offer highly relevant insights. Many textbooks take a similar approach, seeking to demonstrate to their student readers that the ideas of the classics – whoever they include under that label – are relevant to contemporary social questions. Detailed genealogical maps indicated lines of influence from teacher to student and between intellectual school, down to the present, are common tropes in this genre.

Perhaps the most extreme form of a normative-critical genealogical solution is Ashley and Orenstein's (2005). In their version, the contemporary relevance of classical theory lies in its indictment of the reduction of the discipline of sociology into narrow specialization and "middle-range" theory at the expense of the grander classical vision of a unified science of the social with a moral or even prophetic role to play in modern life. In the mode of Nietzschean genealogy, this solution identifies a heroic past inverted into a decadent present. Most genealogies in this genre are more Foucauldian: they seek to show students how much our current forms of thinking are indebted to the past, however natural they may seem. This complex of problems and solutions (historicism-relevance-genealogy) tends to issue in contextualist narratives of the field, in which social theory evolves in response to the socio-political challenges of the times and finds its value in articulating and formulating responses to them.

A humanist justification is less disturbed by problems of representation or relevance. From a humanist point of view, the great books are perpetually relevant by their nature; they encompass the full scope of the human condition in which all persons can find something of value. This means that to the extent that the question of relevance arises, the humanist has a ready-made solution: read the book closely and carefully, and in it you will find something of value to you. More troubling for the strong humanist is the problem of externality. For the humanist, classical thinkers must be understood in their own terms, internal to the problems they set for themselves. In Stones' telling (2008), following Saul Bellow's quip that "when a Zulu writes a great novel then I'll read it," true classics of sociological theory are read on analogy to why we read literature: "for its quality" in contrast to "increase[ing] our knowledge about a particular subject matter" (Stones, 2008, p. 10).[7] External justifications for a text's inclusion, such as historical and geographic context or disciplinary integration or expanding the scope of topics covered, are inherently problematic from the point of view of maintaining "classic quality", and the humanistic textbook author must be on guard against letting them intrude.

> As far as possible, in what follows my criticisms concentrate on the theorist's relative success or failure in addressing the questions he posed to himself, or on the internal coherence of his answers. More 'external' criticism is often unavoidable…All the same, I try as much as possible to judge thinkers in their own terms, rather than mine. (Callinicos, 1999, p. 9)

[7] Later editions removed this argument, a sign that humanist criteria of quality have been difficult to sustain against contextualist and functionalist narratives (Owens, 2015).

Just as problematic from the humanist point of view is the intrusion of inferior works into the inner sanctum of the canon (Mouzelis, 1997). Against this external threat, the humanist seeks to demonstrate via deep hermeneutics that a purported innovation is already contained inside a canonical thinker. "In fact, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were engaged in just the kind of debate about the nature of modernity into which their 'multicultural' critics now wish to draw them" (Callinicos, 1999, p. 10). An alternative solution to the problem is to simply admit works of lesser quality, on the proposition that "if there are no 'classic' quality sociological works on the body or emotions or time and space or post-colonialism then perhaps we will want to read and teach sub-classic or 'yet to be judged as' classic texts on these subjects in order to begin to establish the institutional space and intellectual traditions within which future 'classic' texts can be written" (Stones, 2008, p. 11). Thus, if functionalists and historicists "solve" the problem of the canon by "inclusion" and "relevance," respectively, the humanist does so by articulating the inner potential of a great thinker's ideas in their own terms. If no such thinker or works "ready" for such reading are to be found, the humanist instead seeks to establish an environment where they might be more likely to appear. The humanist response to the problem of the canon in turn incorporates into their narratives a conception of the classics as near inexhaustible funds of insight to be repeatedly re-articulated over and against the truncated thinking of the present.

While in some cases these explanations and responses to the canon come in relatively pure forms, in many cases they exist in hybrid combinations. For example, the historicist account can narrow the set of candidate classics down to those writing in the discipline's formative years who influenced the trajectory of the field; the humanist account justifies the small number of thinkers selected from this group by their superior insight or interpretative fecundity; the functionalist account justifies the continued prominence of these thinkers through their capacity to create disciplinary integration and inclusion. Examples of these sorts of hybridizations are numerous (e.g., *Social Theory a Reader, Social Theory a Textbook, Social Theory Central Issued, Situating Social Theory, Contested Knowledge*). In many cases these hybrids result in dialogical narratives of the field. In these narratives, introductions to sociological theory bring students into that unfolding conversation among authors and perspectives – marked by opposition, imitation, progress, re-evaluation – that we call a tradition.

Avoiding the Problem

Although many textbook authors treat the existence of the sociological canon as an unavoidable social fact, in others the problem simply does not arise. This is not to say that such authors ignore Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Martineau, Mead, Du Bois, or any other potentially canonized classic. Rather, these authors do not organize the field of sociological theory around close study of particular theorists understood to be foundational classics. Instead, they more commonly consider any given theorist in terms of broader theoretical frameworks in which the individual theorist is subsumed. These texts do not face the problem of explaining the canon

and responding to the problems it generates for the simple reason that they do not begin from the social fact of the canon. There is, therefore, nothing to explain.

These textbooks reveal rhetorical strategies by which the problem of the canon may be avoided. There are several such strategies, each with their own prototypical complex of problems and solutions. The typical problem is theoretical fragmentation, perhaps the most recurrent theme across all textbooks.

> From the beginning, sociology has been characterized by disagreements over what are the most important questions that can help us better understand the most fundamental features of the social world. With the expansion of sociology as a major academic discipline, this internal diversity has increased, with various subfields developing their own distinctive perspectives. (Johnson, 2008, p. 8)

Or as Turner (2012) puts it: "there is surprisingly little consensus among sociologist about what theory is and what it is supposed to do for sociological analysis" (p. xi). In these and similar texts, the problem of fragmentation is not closely aligned with the problem of the functional unity of the field, in the sense of sociologists "needing" a common set of reference points "in order to" maintain shared identity. Rather, the problem of fragmentation is presented as a theoretical problem. We are faced with alternative and sometimes competing explanatory frameworks for understanding the social world and we want to understand how these can co-exist in the same field.

Predominant yet non-canonizing solutions to theoretical fragmentation tend to be synthetic or pluralistic. A synthetic solution tells the story of social theory as an (often groping) movement toward a new paradigm that will join or integrate all existing and previous perspectives into a single explanatory framework. This is the sort of narrative Parsons himself proposed, but variants persist in contemporary textbooks. Johnson (2008), for example, proposes that all sociological theories can be synthesized into an integrated "multi-level model" organized around the micro-meso-macro and structure-agency distinctions. Similarly, Parker's *Social Theory: a basic toolkit* advances five core concepts as necessary for the explanation of society (individual, social structure, nature, culture, and action). These concepts are supposed to "[provide] the conceptual umbrella under which the multitude of social theoretical concepts cluster" and to therefore be "primary for social explanation," (Parker et al., 2003, p. 8) as opposed to any particular theorist or perspective. Layder's *Understanding Social Theory* takes a somewhat similar approach in seeking synthesis in a small number of dualisms, such as micro–macro, structure-agency, or individual-society (Layder, 2005).[8] A host of other single unifying syntheses are

[8] "It is often thought that the work of [Talcott Parsons and Karl Marx] is diametrically opposed and, to a large extent, this is true. There are common features, however, in their work which become more apparent as we compare them with other approaches. One of these common features concerns their views about the role of social structural (or macro) features in the shaping of social activity. In this sense they are both 'affirmers' of dualism insofar as they make a distinction between the realm of social activity and the realm of institutions, which represent the social conditions under which such activity takes place" (Layder, 2005, p.13).

proposed in other textbooks where, whatever their plausibility, the result is a narrative of the theoretical tradition in which individual authors' ideas are moments in a trajectory toward theoretical integration such that the problem of the canon need not be "solved" because it does not arise in the first place.

Pluralistic narratives also propose to solve the problem of fragmentation without appealing to a canon, but are less optimistic about doing so by a final or singular synthesis. Turner's *Theoretical Sociology* is a case in point. This text includes no mention in its Introduction about debates surrounding classics or canons but instead discusses the unsettling proliferation of notions of what sociological theory is and does. Whereas Turner clearly represents himself as an advocate of one conception ("scientific theorizing" defined by abstract laws and models) he recognizes the social fact of pluralism and is skeptical about integrating the diverse notions of social theory into a single framework, instead offering some dozen perspectives.

> I have sidestepped the controversy by outlining diverse approaches within twelve broad theoretical traditions. In some, scientific explanation is the dominant view; in others, a more descriptive view prevails; in still others, a critical view of the role of theorizing dominates; and in a few, two or all three visions of what theory should be can be found. My biases are toward scientific theorizing, where abstract laws and models that explain how the social universe operates are preferred. Yet, I have given fair coverage to the alternative approaches because, like it or not, they are part of what is called sociological theory today. (Turner, 2012, p. xi)

Sanderson (2015) and Rojas (2017), among others, take similar approaches, often highlighting theoretical mechanisms and propositions that may be found in any number of thinkers rather than history of social thought or hermeneutics. Other examples of pluralism include Jenks' *Core Sociological Dichotomies* (Jenks, 1998), in which abstract dichotomies (e.g., global vs. local and structure vs. agency) are presented as pathways toward open-ended theoretical inclusion that are less divisive than group-based dichotomies (e.g., men vs. women or blacks vs. whites). Similar to pluralistic narratives that focus on adding individual theorists to the canon, these pluralistic narratives see the growth of the field as an ongoing diversification of paradigms in which individual authors become more or less interchangeable material for elaborating the characteristic claims and concepts of a given paradigm or explanatory model.

Finally, we note a small group of textbooks that pursue what could be called a "skills-based" approach. In these approaches, theoretical fragmentation is less of a problem than the perception that students are not developing the practical skill of theorizing to the fullest potential. In this mode, Martin's *Thinking Through Theory* suggests "orthologics": cultivating habits of mind that allow one to recognize characteristic theoretical problems and antinomies, so as not to fall into them oneself. While this approach can lead one to what Martin calls "theory-ology" – the study of past theorists – the reason for doing so is practical rather than functional or historicist: "there are few ways to learn and implement these skills other than the close analysis of the arguments of others" (p.15). A related approach seeks to shift the goal of the theory course from "reading and analyzing the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and other foundational figures of the discipline" to learning how to theorize

(Swedberg, 2014, p. back cover). The canonical approach to encountering sociological theory is treated as an impediment to developing these kinds of skills:

> While most methods and statistics courses in sociology are skills oriented, the theory course usually is not. It is taught as intellectual history, which is to say that exemplary classical or contemporary texts are described and analyzed in relation to their historical and cultural settings. This approach assumes that students will easily gather, simply from presentations of theories and their origins, what a theory is and how theorizing is done (Schneider, 2006, p. xv).

In this approach, theory is treated as a practice – theorizing – and the goal of the theory textbook is to provide students exercises in cultivating this practice. Stinchcombe (1987) paved the way for this approach, highlighting hypothesis construction and formulating models, while Swedberg's (2014) more recent effort features "the context of discovery," in which students are encouraged to play with their own observations and existing texts to get new ideas.[9] While students might still profitably engage closely with classical authors, the goal is to remove the distance from them, not through establishing a historical lineage or the relevance of their ideas for today's political and social issues. Rather, students are to experience in themselves the proposition that "you do not have to be Max Weber to create a theory" (Swedberg, 2014, p. 60). In this form of theoretical teaching, the canon is not expanded or synthesized or revised or contextualized; it dissolves. What is left is a "pragmatic theoretical education" through which "the great tradition of social theory…continues to exist as something more than required courses and half-hearted introductory sections" (Silver, 2019, p. 133).

Discussion and Conclusion

The core contributions of this study are threefold. The first and primary contribution is new empirical knowledge to the research literature on the history and practice of English-language sociological theory. This in turn contributes to the collective project of disciplinary self-reflection about its formal structures, as well as constitutes a platform for additional comparative, rhetorical, and historical research into the formation and legitimation of scholarly canons.

Our primary contribution is to advance the cumulative progress of empirical research into the practice of sociological theory education and the role of that education in the broader field. Past research has tended to focus on questions such as whether a "canon" exists, who is in it, and what ideas, perspectives, or identities it may or may not exclude or implicitly valorize. Against this background, we identify the discursive practices by which authors justify their use of a canon (or not).

We do so by advancing the proposition that writing and teaching sociological theory is a social practice and that it therefore can and should be understood

[9] See also Silver (2019) which lays out a series of "theory work exercises" for practicing key theoretical skills, such as exegesis, analysis, synthesis, and hypothesis construction.

rhetorically. This approach helps to come to grips with the fact that there is no timeless or singular way to conceive sociological theory. Rather, sociological theory teaching and writing is a practice, and as such it involves creatively confronting situations, defining the problems they present, and pursuing potential solutions to those problems. Situations, problems, and solutions mutually interact to generate new situations, problems, and solutions. While we may profitably examine sociological theory as a creative practice, this does not mean it lacks structure or constraint. Rather, the practical complex of situation-problem–solution generates its habitual forms as textbook authors' "solutions" to the problem of the canon become routinized as a relatively limited number of pre-established pathways. Like a choose-your-own-adventure book, there are many – but not infinite – available pathways. Once one is chosen, it limits the next step available. We have attempted to identify key pathways in the adventure of teaching sociological theory: the functionalist pathway, the historicist pathway, the humanist pathway. Whatever path is taken, it implies a definition of why the canon is a problem, and how to solve it. Codified in Fig. 2, this rhetorical and pragmatic approach allows us to empirically identify core features of the discursive structure of the field.

While these pathways might be known to practitioners to some degree, compiling and codifying them within a rhetorical model makes the implicit explicit and creates a starting point for additional research directions. Creating such a platform constitutes one of the key contributions of this study. One direction points to the past, toward the question of how and why "the canon" became codified as such from out of what was a more fluid situation. Indeed, American theory textbook authors in the 1950s understood themselves to confront a different situation, in which the "canon" barely figured. Rather, they tended to see themselves as carving out a place for theoretical thinking in a field that had become very narrowly empirical in prior decades (Timasheff, 1955; Vine, 1959). Changes across editions of Timasheff's *Sociological Theory: its nature and growth* provide a striking illustration of this transformation. The first (1951) edition distinguished four periods: "pioneering" and "unrelated" efforts up to 1875, the "battle of the schools" and the predominance of evolutionism, a "time of indecision" that stressed psychological foundations, and a period of "convergence" in which a "large body of empirically established propositions" were competing to determine the point of view most "adequate to explain social reality." Durkheim was in the second period, Weber the third, as one among several caught up in "the vogue of psychological sociology." By the 1970 edition, this way of conceptualizing the field had drastically changed. Four periods were reduced to three, with a pre-classical period being followed by "the time of the great classical writers who had a profound effect in shaping sociological theory as we know it today" (Timasheff, 1970, p. 12), while the notion of "battling" frames of reference in the post-classical age also disappeared.

These changes through the editions embody a dramatic change in the field from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the earlier conception, sociological theory was a messy, open-ended dialogue that could have unfolded in many different directions, in which there were no canonized thinkers who stood outside of this living tradition, and contemporary writers stood on an equal footing to their predecessors. In the later version, the canonized theorists were subsumed into a "classical" period, which in turn

became the teleological focal point of the narrative. Theory before the classics was on the way to them; theory after the classics was in their wake. In other words, the invention of the concept of the classical period creates a teleology around it that in turn requires the field of sociological theory to be reconceived in terms of its relationship to its heroic age, when giants walked the earth. A key direction for future research involves seeking to understand more precisely the causes of this change.

Another research direction points outward, toward broader international comparisons. Indeed, preliminary analysis of a similar corpus of German and French textbooks indicates that, for their part, contemporary German and French authors rarely treat Marx-Weber-Durkheim as a "trinity" or trouble themselves with a disciplinary requirement to teach in the same course these three thinkers. In German-speaking sociology, authors are instead often concerned with the problem of multiparadigmatization – that is, the status of sociology as a discipline that cannot accumulate knowledge because of its contradictory assumptions (Fischer, 2014; Balog & Schülein, 2008). While their solution once was to formulate synthetic narratives (Esser, 1999) that relate to the big theoretical debates within German-speaking sociology – from this perspective, even Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* could be regarded as a case point – they afterward began to provide an increasing number of pluralistic narratives (Guzman et al., 2021) and even organize their textbooks around the concept of multiparadigmatization (Kneer & Schroer, 2009).

In France, by contrast, the predominant problem has been to maintain the "national canon" at distinct critical junctures. The initial juncture was led by the institutionalization of the field through Durkheim's networks, followed by the structuring quadrant of Bourdieu, Boudon, Touraine, and Crozier (and their mentors) (Ansart, 1990; Clark, 1973; Heilbron, 2015; Mosbah-Natanson, 2008). Together, this consensus led to a greater emphasis on humanist justifications. However, the latest critical juncture, roughly demarcated from the 1990s onwards, marked an important shift towards historicist justifications. This reflects a growing concern to deal with an increased fragmentation (with no clear contemporary anchors and fundamental differing epistemological visions), efforts to give voice to the discipline's inherent plurality, as well as reflections on broader global forces and individualization processes (Bénatouïl, 1999; Béraud & Coulmont, 2018; Corcuff, 2020; Llored, 2007; Martuccelli, 1999). The recent shift also implies efforts to reconstruct core theoretical foundations by re-historicizing the arc of the discipline in ways that have led to fundamental disagreements for the solutions to the problem of the (national) canon (Dubar, 2006; Heilbron, 2015; Lallement, 2019; Lamont, 2000; Martuccelli, 1999). Following through these initial impressions regarding the problems authors outside the Anglophone context take themselves to confront and the range of solutions they devise constitutes another important research direction opened up by our study.

An additional set of novel research questions arise if we aim to deepen the rhetorical analysis offered here. Our analysis of rhetorical pathways has highlighted their discursive logics, or in Aristotelian terms, the *logoi* of theory textbooks. A full rhetorical analysis would examine their corresponding *ethos* and *pathos*. For example, textbooks in the functionalist mode often couple arguments about the problem of representation with ethical appeals to the character of the theorist as a person

marginalized in the field or especially sensitive to the marginalization of others. Textbooks in the historicist mode routinely add pathos to their arguments about the relevance of foundational theorists of the past by appealing to the sense of excitement and theoretical self-consciousness classical texts have awakened in generations of students, and the similar growth and transformation they might cultivate in the book's student readers. Fuller analysis of the overlapping appeals to character, emotion, and logic, and the creative ways textbook authors combine and modify them, would complement and extend the present study. Leveraging computational text analyses (like topic models and word embeddings) in conjunction with close reading would also offer exciting tools for realizing this possibility (Nelson, 2020). Equally intriguing would be a comparative analysis of the presence, absence, and justifications of canons across multiple fields, such as philosophy, political science, economics, or physics.

By identifying the logics by which textbooks justify the canon (or not), this paper offers an opportunity for broader disciplinary self-reflection about its formal structures. Our pragmatic and rhetorical analysis highlights the forms of argumentation that define how sociological theory is taught. The power of these rhetorical forms lies in their capacity to subsume a wide range of content, while preserving the form. This formal quality means that many seemingly unconventional or even radical proposals in fact reproduce the existing forms. Shoring up the value of the canon for maintaining disciplinary integrity by adding or subtracting members perpetuates the proposition that the reason we read and write sociological theory is its functional value for the field. Adding a new founder perpetuates the proposition that the reason we read and write sociological theory is because it connects us to charismatic persons who single-handedly built the theoretical and institutional house we live in. The names may change, but so long as the form persists, the practice continues along its path. Whatever we decide regarding the merits of this persistence, this paper helps to identify the logic by which it operates.

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