Canon Formation in Late Twentieth Century British Sociology

[We should ask]...if the will to know is not surreptitiously motivated...by a special kind of the will to power, which is displayed in the fact of attempting to adopt towards rivals, reduced to the status of objects, a point of view which they are unable or unwilling to adopt towards themselves. (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. xiii-xiv)

In his classic *Sociology of Philosophies*, Randall Collins (1998: xix and Appendix 1) identifies a generational period of around 33-35 years as the crucial accounting unit in the history of thought.

The century, the period of 100 years, is an arbitrary unit...It would be theoretically more illuminating to describe intellectual history in terms of active generations, about 3 per hundred years. A 33-year period is the approximate length of an individual’s creative work. By the end of that time, a cohort of thinkers will be virtually replaced by a new adult generation. Generational periods constitute a more or less minimal unit for structural change in an intellectual attention space. (Collins, 1998: xix)

The last 35 years or so in British sociology (by which I mean sociology written and taught in the UK) have been marked, I think, by two processes of ‘canonization’. The first is that of the holy trinity of Marx, Weber and Durkheim (sometimes including Simmel) as the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology as we know it. The second, more contentious, is the emergence of what seems at present like a fairly stable ‘canon’ of theorists ascribed a comparably prominent superstar role in contemporary sociology; my tentative list here (in alphabetical order) is Bauman, Beck, Bourdieu and Giddens. I shall suggest that these two processes are related.
These four thinkers, despite the spread of their ages, can for practical purposes be assigned to the same professional generational cohort. Bauman, born the earliest of the four in 1925, did not begin work as an academic until 1954, starting to publish in the late 1950s in Poland and after 1971 in Britain. Bourdieu, born in 1930, published his first book in 1960, on Algeria, where he held his first university post. The book had a major impact. Bourdieu moved to Paris in 1960; his book on students, *Les Héritiers*, which was the first ‘outcome’ of his work on education, was similarly influential in France; *Reproduction* followed in 1970. Giddens, born in 1938, was appointed to a lectureship at Leicester in 1961 and published his first book, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*, in 1971. Beck, born in 1944, was awarded his doctorate in 1972 and hit the news in 1986 with his book *Risikogesellschaft (Risk Society)*, whose publication was soon followed by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

In 1971, then, when I choose to start the Collins clock, Bauman has just arrived in Leeds; Bourdieu is well established in Paris and Giddens at Cambridge (since 1969); Beck is completing his doctorate. Giddens is particularly significant here, since his book of that year, despite often being buried by librarians in the Economics section, inaugurated the holy trinity of Marx, Weber and Durkheim who continue to dominate ‘classical sociology’ in the UK. I remember the charismatic young Giddens presenting something from his forthcoming book at a seminar in Oxford, and being impressed by the depth of his engagement with these thinkers. At the same time my tutor, Steven Lukes, was turning his massive doctoral thesis on Durkheim into what remains the definitive book on him; Paul Hirst was also working on a doctoral thesis on Durkheim, which he did not complete but which he published as a book in 1975. The Weber industry was gathering momentum in Germany and *Economy and Society* had appeared in a substantial English-language edition in 1968.

In his *Conversations* with Keith Tester (Tester and Bauman, 2001, p. 22), Bauman responds to a question about what he drew ‘from the classical social thinkers: Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel’ in the following terms:

I do not remember any concept of the ‘classic’ (or for that matter ‘founding father of sociology’ being applied selectively to the Marx-Weber-Durkheim triad or any other chosen individuals in my student years, as was to become a
habit later, largely under the influence of Talcott Parsons. Each kind of sociology weaves its own etiological myths and conjures up its own forefathers; it also chooses the way its ancestors are selected and the significance attached to that selection. Parsons’s struggle to rewrite the history of sociology as an unbroken line of progress ending in the all-embracing Parsonian synthesis was an intellectual gloss on the (fortunately soon to be dashed) bid for a church-like theological domination, and such a bid needed its saints and required a Pantheon of strictly controlled composition. An invitingly open sociology suspicious of, and resistant to, all monopoly claims has no need to split the lore into the canon and the apocrypha.

It is true that Parsons had earlier been responsible for raising the profile of what came to be seen as classical European social theory, though his principal protagonists were Durkheim, Weber and Pareto. In the late sixties and early seventies, however, the main driver was probably the revival of interest in Marx, with the theorists of the turn of the century drawn in his wake, where they were not explicitly counterposed to him. Bauman, alone among the four, had been an explicit Marxist, and he remained massively influenced by Marx as well as by ‘Simmel, who started it all’ (Bauman, 1992). Bourdieu’s sociology, too, could be called post-Marxist if the term had not been attached to rather different intellectual and political projects. Giddens had to spend a good deal of time in the 1970s differentiating his approach from Marxism, whereas Beck’s reference-point in the 1980s was more clearly Frankfurt critical theory.

Alongside the revival of interest in the classics, contemporary sociological theory, too, became more ambitious and speculative in the 1970s, with a shift of hegemony from the US to Europe and an explosion of interest in Althusserian Marxism, Frankfurt School critical theory, British Wittgensteinian philosophy, French structuralism and the work of Michel Foucault, Bourdieu, and others. What Quentin Skinner called The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences, in a BBC radio series in 1983 and an edited volume in 1985 which documented this shift, meant that 'the classics' seemed less like remote ancestors and more like older contemporaries. In interpreting first the classics and then more recent and contemporary theoretical
currents, in a series of brilliant articles and books, Giddens was surfing a wave he had in part himself created. A joke of the time gave a contextual definition of the verb ‘to gidden’: ‘he giddens together Marx, Weber and Durkheim into a new and original theory’.

The other three thinkers did not on the whole go in for such rediscoveries and reappraisals. Bauman published a book on *Critical Sociology* (1976) and another on *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (1978), but then moved on to more substantive topics, beginning with his book on intellectuals, *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987). Bourdieu’s *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* (1972), translated in 1977 as *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) was in large part a critical engagement with structuralism, and the edited collection *Le métier de sociologue* (1973), translated after a considerable lag in 1991 as *The Craft of Sociology*, inevitably included such themes, but on the whole Bourdieu avoided them; his book on Heidegger (Bourdieu, 1975) was more concerned with his political thought. Beck has entirely avoided works of expository critique, though he makes considerable reference to ‘zombie categories’ and what he criticises as ‘methodological nationalism’. The theme of environmental risk, addressed by Beck in his path-breaking *Risikogesellschaft*, which rapidly went into a second edition after the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986, began to shape Giddens’s thinking, as shown in *Consequences of Modernity*, as well as that of many others.

Sociology's sense of its own past also shifted in this period. Giddens had attacked, in an influential article in 1972, what he called the 'myth of the great divide' which had been set between the more or less unformed or chaotic pre-history of sociology and the subject in its modern 'scientific' form. This conception, he argued, involved both a lack of sensitivity to the work of the classical sociological thinkers and an undue degree of confidence in the scientific credentials of 'our' social thought. Substantively, sociology shifted its theoretical focus from 'industrialism' or 'industrial society' to 'capitalism' or 'late capitalism', and then to a broader focus on 'modernity', in which it addressed dimensions of power (including state power in its international dimension)\(^{11}\) and culture.
Again, Giddens was in the lead in this process, at least in relation to the national state, with the other three thinkers now converging on issues of this kind. Modernity was very much the buzz-word from the 1980s to the present, along with its presumed counterpart postmodernity and variants such as ‘reflexive modernity’ (Giddens) and ‘second modernity (Beck). Giddens and Beck presented their alternative conceptions in a collective discussion which also included Scott Lash (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Bauman took a postmodern turn for a time (Bauman, 1992; 1993; 1995; 1997), before settling on a notion of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000) which he has traced through so many subsequent books that one desperate reader has called for something to stop the flow (Turner, forthcoming). Bourdieu confined himself to railing against postmodernism, while maintaining friendly relations with many of its protagonists. All four have a version of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) call individualization, linked to the fluidity (Bauman) and unscriptedness (Giddens) of contemporary social roles. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 2) define it thus:

On the one hand, individualization means the disintegration of previously existing social forms – for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood etc.

…the second aspect of individualization…is, simply that in modern societies new demands are being imposed on individuals. Through the job market, the welfare state and institutions, people are tied into a network of regulations, conditions, provisos...

The decisive feature of these modern regulations and guidelines is that, far more than earlier, individuals must, in part, supply them for themselves, import them into their biographies through their own actions.

This notion, then, is close to what Giddens and Bauman try to capture in their own accounts of this duality; Bauman, indeed. wrote an enthusiastic forward to the book. Bourdieu may seem more deterministic, but his notion of habitus was designed precisely to capture a notion of agency missing from structuralist anthropology (Bourdieu, 1972). Both Bourdieu and Giddens can be seen as post-structuralist thinkers, not in the usage ascribed in the English-speaking countries to
Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari and others, but in the sense that they reacted to structuralism (as well as to Goffman and to ethnomethodology).

The 1990s saw the beginning of globalization theory, and all four plunged into this new wave. Giddens is an old friend and former Leicester colleague of Martin Albrow, one of the pioneers of globalization theory in the late 1980s (Albrow and King, 1990; Albrow, 1993; 1997; 2007). Giddens co-founded Polity Press in 1986 with John Thompson and David Held, who had also been writing about globalization since 1990 (Held, 1990; 1991). Giddens’ Reith lectures of 1999 were his first major statement on globalization, but also addressed the very Beckian theme of risk in *A Runaway World*. Reith lectures had previously been delivered in a studio, usually in London, but Giddens ‘performed’ globality by delivering them in four other sites around the world, with dialogues with local audiences, including a Monty Python moment in London with a phone call from Blair in Downing Street. Beck had published a book on globalization in 1997, and Bauman a short and rather gloomy one in 1998. Bourdieu, who by now had moved into a more militant mode marked by the publication of *La misère du monde* (1993) and what became a series of public interventions ended only by his death in 2002, was even more negative in his response to globalization.

Their analyses of globalization constitute an interesting basis on which to compare the four. Bourdieu, as noted above, was not so much concerned with analysis as with a political critique of globalization and the neoliberal ideology (*pensée unique*) which accompanies it. All of them, of course, insist as sociologists (as Albrow had done) that globalization should not be seen primarily as an economic process. Giddens, who had taken from Goffman and from ethnomethodology a stress on the ‘knowledgeability’ of human beings, incorporates this into his analysis of reflexive modernity and globalization. Beck, by contrast, uses the same term reflexivity to denote the production of unintended consequences, as in Ivan Illich’s ‘iatrogenic disease’ (Illich, 1975). They converge, however, with one another and with Bauman, on the juggernaut or ‘runaway world’ aspect of globalization. Their political responses diverge, from Giddens’ hope for the revitalization of dialogical democracy and what became the post-social-democratic politics of the ‘Third Way’,
through Beck’s ‘reinvention of politics’ through the revitalization of some of the more positive ‘sub-political’ spheres to something more fundamental in Bauman, outlined in his book a year later on politics. All of them are primarily in a mode of response and defence, with Giddens having explicitly invoked conservative themes in his earlier book Beyond Left and Right (1994) and in The Third Way (1998). Politically, Giddens and Beck are close to mainstream social democracy, with Bourdieu and Bauman out in left field.

The new century sees Bourdieu’s early death from cancer, Giddens’ continuation of an administrative and political role alongside the production of some policy and political books, Bauman continuing to cultivate his liquid garden, and Beck developing his work on globalization into the areas of cosmopolitan and more specifically European Union politics. The configuration of sociological attention therefore changes, with Bourdieu and Giddens remaining central theoretical reference-points focussed mainly, and in Bourdieu’s case necessarily, on their work in the last century, while Bauman’s and Beck’s current work continues to build on their previous activity. (As noted earlier, Beck had in any case never written a work of ‘pure’ theory as the others had done, to varying degrees and in different ways.)

In the hope that this brief sketch of the past few decades of the capi di tutti capi of British sociology is accurate enough to serve as a starting point, let me see what I can offer by way of explanation and analysis. First, the question which follows elections, appointment committees and so forth: If we sociologists in the UK did attribute distinction to these four colleagues and their respective oeuvres with increasing conviction as the twentieth century moved to its end and the twenty-first began, were we right to do so? Each of them has of course attracted severe criticism, for their sociological work as distinct from their various political attachments. We are sometimes told, for example, that structuration theory is unoriginal and overstated, that others have a better account of state power or history than Giddens, that Bourdieu’s or Bauman’s models are repetitively applied like a sausage machine, that Bauman or Beck is superficial, journalistic or insufficiently ‘sociological’.

I shall not address these criticisms in detail, though they form a counterpoint to the unquestionable marks of distinction accrued by these four thinkers. More
interesting, I think, are a set of intellectual structures which link all four, to varying degrees. Running though my earlier exposition in reverse order, I begin with the theme of globalization. All four, as we have seen, have substantially addressed this, so if globalization theory is a mistake, as some acute critics have suggested (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Rosenberg, 2000), Bauman, Beck and Giddens at least can be accused of misleading us and ‘wasting sociological time’. Similarly, anyone who feels, not just that the term ‘modernity’ has been overused, but that it is fundamentally problematic (Wood, 1999) will know that these three are primarily to blame. Those particularly enraged by postmodernism will not easily forgive Bauman for his flirtation with it. Finally, some will regret this entire ‘continental’ direction of sociological theory, seeing it as unwelcome diversion from a healthier state in the earlier postwar period in which theory operated more as an interpreter of empirical research and less as a would-be legislator. Such critics tend to point out that theorists such as these three (Bourdieu is again an exception) have done little empirical research.

I shall not engage these criticisms in relation to globalization and modernity, but I think that the charge misses the mark in relation to the role of theory. All four thinkers have consistently presented their theoretical models as directing attention to certain phenomena and providing a loose framework for analysis, rather than laying down formal categories in the manner of Parsons or, more recently, Luhmann or Richard Münch. Giddens’ structuration theory, for example, is contingently, rather than logically, linked with his substantive analyses of class stratification, state power or globalization. At the back of this is partly, though I shall not go into it here, a change in intellectual style in the late 1960s, with system theory tending to become more conventionalist and constructivist; formal models survived longer in some areas of structural Marxism.

What about the material relations of intellectual production as they concern these four thinkers? And a related question: how far is their rise to be seen as predictable? A Martian materialist would immediately point to the obvious fact that the other three gravitated towards Polity Press (which Giddens, as noted earlier, had set up in 1985 with Held and Thompson), either for their own books or, in the case of Bourdieu and Beck, for the translations of them. Giddens, of course, was long
established as a major presence and did not need his own press to get his books published. Bauman, too, had published five books between 1972 and 1985. The case of the others is perhaps a little more open. Bourdieu was well established as a translated author by the mid-1980s, with three books in English, but much of his earlier work was not published in translation until some years later, and then mostly by Polity (and in the US by its partner, Stanford). Beck, though he had published relatively little, had been since 1980 editor of the journal Soziale Welt. His Risk Society appeared in English with a substantial lag of six years, despite the impact of the Chernobyl disaster which had guaranteed the original version an immediate second edition in Germany. After publishing two books with Sage, Beck appears to have settled with Polity. Translation is of course extremely expensive, and was seen by Polity as a worthwhile activity but not a commercially profitable one. It may well be that Bourdieu and Beck benefited from more than usually generous support, as well as coming to enjoy the intrinsic benefits of being published by sociological colleagues and friends as well as by an extremely efficient publishing house. Giddens was also from an early stage an admirer of Bauman’s work, though initially Tom Bottomore’s support may have been more important.

There is also, of course, the prior issue that, for Bauman, his move to the UK was entirely unpredictable. Although he had made earlier trips here and published in English, one must presume that if he had not been dismissed from his chair at Warsaw in the pogrom of 1968 he would have stayed there, with the usual longer or shorter visits elsewhere on guest professorships – in fact rather like Beck. Whether his work would then have developed as it did is entirely unknowable; the presumption must be that he would have written much more about Poland – something he deliberately chose not to do when he settled in Leeds – and in Polish, thus confronting the usual hurdles of translation. He was undoubtedly already exceptional in the Polish context, but had he stayed there he might not have enjoyed more than perhaps the success in world sociology of his teacher Stanisław Ossowski or other contemporaries.

This raises a further issue of some interest. Our quartet of the leading theoretical reference-points of British sociology includes only one native. Bauman is one of the cluster of immigrants who fundamentally shaped British sociology and social theory in the second half of the twentieth century. They include Stanislaw
Andreski, Gi Baldamus, Zevedei Barbu, Julius Carlebach, Percy Cohen, Ralf Dahrendorf, Norbert Elias, Ernest Gellner, Stuart Hall, Karl Mannheim, Ilya Neustadt, Karl Popper, John Rex, Teodor Shanin, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Peter Worsley and Sami Zubaida. Bauman’s age puts him among the younger members of this list, but he settled in the UK much later than most of the others and his rise to prominence also came later, as we have seen, in the late 1970s and 1980s. Secondly, he is part of a specifically Polish cohort which includes the sociologist Maria Hirschowitz, the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski and the economist Wlodzimierz Brus, who were driven out of Poland at the same time and on the same counter-Socratic grounds that they had corrupted students and encouraged their oppositional activity. To this cohort one could add, from an earlier wave of emigration, Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004), who lived in France and the US but whose work was very influential in the UK as well, and Stanislaw Andreski (1919-2007), who founded Sociology at Reading, where Hirschowitz also taught.

If Bauman’s position in British sociology is therefore not so surprising, and certainly less surprising than the accident of his initial move to the UK, the position of Bourdieu and Beck is perhaps more striking. Both are, I suspect, a bigger presence in the UK than in the US where, conversely, figures like Randall Collins loom larger than they do here. And this presence in Britain is essentially through their writings. Bourdieu was rarely in the UK, and, although Beck holds a visiting post at the London School of Economics, his main base is in Munich. Their prominence says something, I think, about the relatively open nature of British sociology, and perhaps British intellectual life more generally, at least if compared, say, to France, as well as the gradual globalization of academic life worldwide. Another important aspect for all four is the interplay between their strictly academic activities and their broader roles as public intellectuals. None of them, I think, particularly sought the latter role, whether from modesty or, particularly in Bourdieu’s case, a suspicion of the cult of the intellectual in France. Beck came to prominence as a theorist of environmental risk, a topic with a high resonance nationally and internationally. If and when it comes, however, such a strong public and media presence tends to consolidate an existing academic reputation.
How much room is there, then, at the top, and how does one get there? All four are of course male and white, and this points to a general feature of British sociology, that as its gender and ‘racial’ imbalance reduces over time, it remains particularly strong in the field of social theory and the philosophy of social science. As in literary study, the ‘theory boys’ tended to be…boys. There is, of course, a clear counter-example here, that of Margaret Archer, who after early work in the sociology of education and on Europe has done fundamental work in realist social theory. President of the International Sociological Association at the end of the 1980s, her reputation, like that of Tom Bottomore in an earlier generation, is, if anything, even stronger outside than inside the UK. Other female theorists tended, for obvious reasons, to work in the growing field of feminist theory, which fundamentally reshaped the discipline, but not really at its core.²⁹ It is probably essential for canonical status to be categorised as a general theorist, rather than one specialising in class, gender, ethnicity or a specialism such as work, education or medicine. But it may also be important to be more than just a theorist and to have some substantive work, such as Giddens’s on the state or on self-identity, which readers without a taste for pure theory can latch onto. If this can be summarised in a single word or phrase, such as structuration’, ‘risk’, liquidity’ or ‘habitus’, so much the better. Archer’s concept of the ‘internal conversation’ may come to play a similarly important place. Once again, Therborn (2000, p. 42) puts his finger on it:

It is in this perspective of understanding and discourse, that social labelling, as a way of grasping and conveying the sense of the contemporary world, becomes so central to sociologists of prime-time aspirations. Are we living in post-modernity, or in reflexive modernity, or perhaps in a second modernity, in a risk society or in an event society (Erlebnisgesellschaft), in an information society, network society, or maybe in something completely different?³⁰

Is the ‘return of grand theory’ likely to be permanent? First, we need to question how substantial it was. British sociology, as a glance through this journal illustrates, has always resembled an iceberg, with the greater part consisting of substantive and often empirical studies (Heath and Edmonson, 1981: 45). Certain processes which predominated in the past thirty-odd years, such as the rediscovery of the classics, may now seem to be essentially complete. Further work will of course
continue to be done on them, and journals like *History of the Human Sciences* and the *Journal of Classical Sociology* provide a natural home for it, but one can expect the emphasis to become increasingly historical and only rarely presentist. There may also be an individual life-cycle effect, as the sociologist develops their theory in engagement with classical and contemporary influences and then moves on to apply it in increasingly substantive, empirical, or policy-oriented studies. Giddens’s trajectory seems paradigmatic of this progression, reflecting an internalist impulse to use what had been so thoroughly elaborated. One can expect to find also the kind of process theorised by Durkheim and applied to philosophy by Collins, in which thinkers move out of fields perceived to be overcrowded.\(^3\) (In another related area, that of literary and cultural theory, there was a move around the middle of this recent period to ‘new historicism’.) Therborn (2000) suggests a rather different periodization, in which the thinkers on whom I have focussed here occupy an intermediate period between a substantially evolutionist and structural-functional past and a possible future dominated by nodes of investigation, diverse but linked by what remains a recognizably sociological approach (as distinct from an economic or rational choice one).\(^4\)

There remains of course the question where British sociology as a whole is going. As John Urry (1981) suggested, sociology has tended to grow at its margins, offering hospitality to adjacent ‘disciplines’ and research fields such as law or politics or new ones such as urban, media or gender studies. In particular, having been a prime source of what became cultural studies, it has often merged with it in one of the more harmless forms of incest. Urry (2005) has recently returned to this theme in an upbeat response to a judicious overview by John Scott (2005). As Urry (2005: 1.7) notes, a sociological understanding is spreading widely across management and public policy: ‘So sociology has gone underground and pops up like the islands of an archipelago in unexpected places through dealing with the complex, intractable and problematic nature of social life.’ Urry’s metaphor may seem a little ambiguous as sea levels rise and some of our richer universities wave goodbye to money deposited in Iceland. The UK universities themselves seem to meander inconsequentially and expensively between departmental and interdisciplinary formations, without any clear line of direction.
Despite all these uncertainties, I am inclined to predict that broadly defined social, political and cultural theory, the theory of TCS, Constellations or Thesis Eleven, will continue to be a significant presence and to retain an important place in sociology in the UK. And this would have clear implications both for the continued canonical status of the four thinkers discussed here and for the emergence of others in the future. In other words, a necessary though not sufficient condition of the attainment of canonical status is to be seen to be making a contribution not just to sociological theory but to social theory more broadly – as well as offering theoretical perspectives on issues of current concern. The relation between social theory and ‘diagnosis of the times’, introduced into British sociology by Karl Mannheim and recently revived by Axel Honneth (2000), seems likely to be a dominant motif of sociology in the present century. We may wonder if we chose ‘the right four’, but the style of theorizing which they introduced seems to be here to stay.
Bibliography


(The web version includes a French translation.)


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1 I am grateful to Simon Susen for his very helpful comments on this paper and to two anonymous reviews for theirs on an earlier version.

2 See also p. 294, n.54: ‘We can see that the particular nature of its object…places sociology in a quite special position: if it does happen that the opinion of scholars becomes an orthodoxy here, it is more often fated to be greatly dispersed because of the absence of strict academic and especially social control over entrants to the profession and the correlative diversity of the social and academic origins of those producing the opinion.’

3 See also Peter Baehr (1999) for a review of Collins. 33 may be a little on the short side for the contemporary period, unless one takes a sceptical view of the creativity of the ageing. (Readers disappointed by this article may wish to know that it is now 37 years since I wrote the MA thesis which became my first book (Outhwaite, 1975).)
Peter Baehr (2002: chapter 6) has questioned the use of the term ‘canon’ in relation to the sociological ‘classics’. I am using it here in an informal sense and what I have in mind is more the ‘canonization’ of these thinkers, rather than of specific texts. Only in Beck’s case, I think, is there a single key text (Risk Society); Giddens presented *The Constitution of Society* in something like these terms, but it is probably less read than many of his other, shorter, works. All four writers are so prolific that they tend, I suspect, to be consumed by students largely in the form of extracts, informally prescribed or sometimes grouped in ‘readers’ such as Beilharz (2001) for Bauman, Wacquant (2006) for Bourdieu and Cassell (1993) for Giddens. I am not aware of the existence of a Beck reader, but no doubt there will be one along any minute. Baehr (2002: 166) questions the use of the term canonization because there is nothing in sociology comparable to the Vatican’s ‘Congregation of the Causes of Saints’, but this seems to me a little pedantic. The more important point, of course, is that we shall not know for another Collins cycle or so whether these reputations are durable.

This may be a lagged effect: Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, for example, became major figures only around the time of their deaths, and Spinoza and Aristotle much later (Collins, 1998: 59, 61; see also Baehr, 1999). In the case of the sociological classics discussed below, this is also of course very much a retrospective canonisation, taking place half a century after the deaths of the three turn-of-the-century thinkers. Simmel’s place was achieved later (as an anonymous reader of an earlier version of this paper pertinently pointed out) and continues to be much less secure than that of the ‘holy trinity’. Marx is of course a special case, given the ongoing impact of Marxist thought, though his relation to sociology remains a matter of contention. Bukharin (1921) and the Austro-Marxists defended the idea of Marxist sociology, followed by Lucien Goldmann (1959) in France and Tom Bottomore (1974, 1984) in Britain; other Marxists set sociology in opposition to Marxism; see note 7 below.

Habermas would be an obvious ‘fifth man’ (the list is of course male, for reasons to be explored later), but I have excluded him on the grounds, noted by Peter Baehr (2002: 111-112), that his place tends to be seen on the borders of philosophy and social theory rather than squarely within sociology. The same goes *a fortiori* for Foucault, despite his massive influence on British sociology, both in general and in a number of specialised areas such as the sociology of deviance, medicine and the body. Another candidate would be the great historical sociologist and theorist Norbert Elias. The fact that it is theorists rather than exemplars (in Kuhn’s sense) of substantive sociological analysis is again an issue which will play a large part in my discussion. For the moment I am concerned simply to note it. Finally, a sociologist sensitive to alphabetical discrimination might point out that we have three Bs and a G among the surnames here.

Beck, 1974. Only one UK library (Cambridge) has a copy of this.

There is a tendency in some of the non-UK literature on Bauman to portray Leeds as the backwoods; this is not really accurate even for the 1970s.

In the canonization of the classics, Pareto seems to have drawn the short straw. The reasons for this are not my immediate concern here, but they would no doubt include the inordinate length of his major works, the absence of a significant contemporary interpreter such as Lukes for Durkheim or Marxists (and some others) for Marx, the unfashionability of elite theory and, in the background, the discrediting of fascism.
Classics of the latter genre were Göran Therborn’s *Science, Class and Society* (1976) and Martin Shaw’s *Marxism and Social Science* (1975), and of course the work of Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst and others. As Therborn (2000: 37) later noted, ‘…the multiple voices around the past turn of the century have been filtered into a canon of select classics, which still constitute most of the core that sociological education has.’

Giddens and Martin Shaw converged on this theme, along with sociologically sensitive scholars in the relatively new (for the UK) field of International Relations such as Christopher Thorne. (See for example Thorne, 1985.) Giddens has always had rather little explicitly to say about culture, though some of his work on everyday life and self-identity might be said to address these issues. For Bauman, culture has always been a major focus of interest (both in his book on *Culture as Praxis* (Bauman, 1973) and more generally), as of course it was for Bourdieu and for substantial elements of Beck’s work.


See also p. 202, where Beck stresses that individualization is not individualism. This is one of the areas where their work draws on and intersects with that of Foucault and of British writers such as Nikolas Rose. Giddens (1990: 59) also makes surveillance one of the ‘institutional dimensions of modernity’, along with industrialism, capitalism and military power.

Scott Lash, in another Forward to the same book, argues that Beck’s approach is very different from Giddens’, but I am not convinced by this. For a fuller exploration of their differences, see Beck, Giddens and Lash (1997).

Thompson comes into the story from a different point: as well as introducing a translation of Bourdieu and publishing much of his work, he has written the definitive account of contemporary academic publishing (Thompson, 2005).

This term is interestingly used by the translator of the Becks’ book to render the phrase in the title of Beck, Vossenkuhl and Ziegler (1995): ‘…die unbekannte Gesellschaft, in der wir leben’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 29). (See also Gane 2001.) Giddens had earlier addressed the theme of risk and referred to Beck’s book and an English-language article (Beck, 1987) in his lecture series of 1988, published as *Consequences of Modernity* (Giddens, 1990: ch. IV). Thanks again to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this. I wrote at the time, in a review of Giddens’ book, that ‘Risikogesellschaft…seems to have operated as a catalyst to bring some of Giddens’ earlier preoccupations, in particular the theme of insecurity, to the centre of his analysis’. (Apologies for the self-citation, but the UK’s impending Research Excellence Framework (REF) will no doubt drive us all to desperate measures of this kind.)

The Python series included a sketch in which a group of ladies in a laundrette telephone Sartre to resolve a disagreement. ‘Is he free?’, they ask, and the reply is that he’s been trying to decide that for years.

I am exceptionally grateful here for Luke Martell’s advice and comments. Following the publication of his own major book (Martell, 2009), he is currently working on a critical analysis of social theories of globalization. See also Gane, 2001.

For what it’s worth, I must confess that I have been extremely happy to work in an intellectual environment substantially shaped by these thinkers.

There is an offence under English law of ‘wasting police time’, though the police themselves seem to be exempt.
Even if, as John Holmwood (2009) has suggested, Habermas takes over Parsons’
categories, the mode and style of theorizing in which he uses them are surely very
different. For a more hostile view of what he calls ‘representational’ theory, see

This is of course often presented as a criticism, as by Baert (1998): ‘…in Giddens’s
texts on modernity the core of his structuration theory is absent. The concepts which
he introduces (such as “institutional reflexivity”) are independent of structuration
theory, and are not derived from it.’

As a corollary one might add that each of these thinkers is somewhat cavalier in
dismissing other approaches. Baert argues that Giddens’ critical accounts of
functionalism and evolutionism apply only to earlier versions; Beck’s critique of
‘methodological nationalism’ has been effectively criticised by Chernilo (2006).

Meja, Misgeld and Stehr (1987) included an earlier chapter by Beck (1983) on the
individualisation of class positions.

I recall him saying to me at a conference where Bauman had just given a paper that
his work was insufficiently appreciated.

As he established himself in the West, he refused the role of ‘area specialist’ or
‘sovietologist’ (Bauman and Tester, 2006: 273) and commented on affairs in the
communist world only in relation to specific events such as the rise of Solidarity

See his sardonic discussion in Appendix 3 to Homo Sociologicus of ‘The Hit Parade
of French Intellectuals’ (Bourdieu, 1988 [1984]: 256-70. For a more recent study, see
Jeanpierre and Natanson, 2008. Bourdieu did, of course, eventually come to embrace
the role of militant public sociologist.

Giddens insisted from an early stage on the importance of feminism. On the broader
issue of women as intellectuals, see Evans, 2008.

According to Collins’ sociology of philosophy, with its stress on competition within
networks, Hegel, for example, was impelled towards a historical and social focus
because Fichte and Schelling had already appropriated other areas of philosophy.
‘Located at the center of action in a crowded and highly competitive space, he got
virtually the last attention slot available…He found the slot by focussing on history,
both of the intellectual community itself and of its links to the surrounding social
world in general.’ (Collins, 2000: 657)

I should add that Therborn draws a rather finer-grained distinction between an
emphasis on social antagonism and emancipation around 1975 and a more open-
ended approach to the contingencies of action and structure toward the end of the
twentieth century. He also notes (p. 47) the ongoing tension between scientistic and
humanistic approaches to sociology, while hoping, as I do, that the ‘unhappy
marriage’ will not lead to divorce.

It has long been the case that second-hand book dealers are more likely to welcome
works of theory if they are offered as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘social’.