

When Baehr met Steffen: Appraising classicality through the lens of neglect

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Abstract

Classical sociology has long served as a locus for the discipline's self-understanding, and is a phenomenon increasingly studied in its own right. The growing literature is synthesised in Peter Baehr's renowned framework for scrutinising reception and formation processes. By theorising on the trajectories of multiple classics, Baehr has helped pave the way for sociology's understanding of how classicality becomes established. This paper deploys this framework in order to appraise neglected work with classicality potential in early sociology, namely the bulky production of Sweden's main candidate for a classic, Gustaf F. Steffen (1864–1929), with special attention given to his magnum opus *Sociology: A general theory of society* (1910–1911). The analysis exposes some of the conceptual ambiguity in Baehr's framework, while proposing that both the notion of a 'classic' and the sole focus on reception and formation need to be expanded. This article also argues that our understanding of classicality could be advanced if we were to distinguish between author, text, and theory, since each of these plays different roles in reception, formation, and neglect processes.

Keywords

classical sociology, sociology of knowledge, history of sociology, sociological theory, intellectual history, reception studies, Swedish sociology, Gustaf Steffen

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Introduction

For a century, sociologists have been debating who to define as the pioneers of sociology and just how applicable they are to contemporary times. In simplified terms, we find ourselves with two main attitudes on the centrality of classics in sociology, namely protectors and attackers of the current order. On the one hand, we find numerous acts of protection stressing the intrinsic value of working with classics (e.g.

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Alexander, 1996; How, 2016). On the other hand, there have been several sociologists questioning the position maintained by the chosen few classics within the discipline by, for instance, stressing the irrelevance of classical theory to the study of contemporary societies (e.g. Merton, 1967; Watts, 2014). In recent times, the latter position is often accompanied by a critique of the Eurocentric bias of the canon (e.g. Bhambra, 2016; Connell, 1997). Despite decades of reoccurring criticism, the line of defence remains intact as sociologists around the globe continue to employ classics in their research and teaching.

In this paper, I have no intention to argue for ‘the relevance of the classics today’ (How, 2016: 51) or against prolonging ‘a story of “great men”’ that is continuously reinforced in sociological practice (Connell, 1997: 1546). Rather, the starting point of my endeavour is acknowledging that classicality has been, and still is, a principal part of this discipline. It is not easy to find a single renowned sociologist of the 20th century that has not grounded their main theory on at least one classic. Now, sociologists holding the disciplinary status of the likes of Pierre Bourdieu – who operationalised concepts found in the classics to critically study academic ‘consecration’ (Bourdieu, 1988) – begin to form a coalition of contemporary classics on top of the classical classics (Wagner, 2012). This suggests that new acts of ‘consecration’ will not end any time soon, and is one of the reasons why I would argue that the phenomenon of classicality ought to be addressed by sociologists in its own right. I believe Collins (1997: 1564) had something similar in mind when he called for sociologists of knowledge to delve deeper into the ‘sociology of canonicity’.

The processes of how works come to be regarded as classics have been studied within the broad scholarship of reception and formation studies (e.g. da Silva and Vieira, 2011; Platt, 1995). The insights generated in the field have been synthesised to fit, as in the case of sociology in sociologist Baehr’s (2002: 111, 120, 135) attempt to answer ‘Why is “X” a classic?’ and ‘Why did some texts achieve that status while others did not?’ by generating ‘four factors [...] to describe the process of classic reception/formation – *cultural resonance*, *textual suppleness*, *reader appropriation* and, *social transmission and diffusion* – [that] are best envisioned both diachronically and synchronically’. For the last 25 years, Baehr’s work has been one of the most popular and utilised frameworks for studying classicality processes by sociologists, making it a suitable theory for investigating the explanatory power of how classicality emerges.

Baehr’s framework is built on previous studies of classical works, but these success stories are not explicitly compared with and differentiated from cases not regarded to be classics, even though the latter make up the vast majority of sociological works. However, this missing component is not a product of ignorance, but rather a reflection of the literature in its current state. Very few studies of the so-called ‘forgotten sociologists’ are conducted to grasp the rituals of classicality, canonicity, and consecration (Grundmann and Stehr, 2001). Most authors are instead devoted to making a case for why an overlooked author or text ought to be elevated to the status of a classic (e.g. Abdullahi and Salawu, 2012; Adamek and Radwan-Pragłowski, 2006), which is of little help in illuminating the phenomenon of classicality and enhancing Baehr’s framework.

The underlying question is, therefore, whether the particularistic learnings of success stories can give the full picture of the classic formation process. To answer this question, we have to look into how well Baehr’s framework can help to structure the stories of why some texts become neglected. The present article aims to explore and examine whether the tools developed to explain reception and formation processes of classics are applicable to the study of neglect processes of sociological texts and theories as well as the scholars who authored them. A further purpose is to investigate the implications of these results for how classicality is conceptualised within our discipline, which I argue is in and of itself an interesting point of departure if we want to move towards more reflexive sociology.

The chosen case for investigating a ‘forgotten sociologist’ and his scholarly contributions is Sweden’s first professor of sociology, Gustaf F. Steffen (1864–1929). Steffen was the initial holder of a Chair in Economics and Sociology at the University of Gothenburg. The chair was established in 1903 and held by Steffen until his passing in 1929 (Lilliestam, 1960). During the first decades of the 20th century, Swedish-speaking academics (e.g. Aspelin, 1937: 256; Karsten, 1945: 6, 177) and public intellectuals (e.g. Henriksson-Holmberg, 1923: 50; Thörnberg, 1925: 194) acknowledged Steffen as a

Swedish pioneer of sociology. Nevertheless, scholars have accentuated how Steffen's academic contributions have been neglected and were even removed from the general narrative of sociology in Sweden established in the late 1940s (Boalt and Abrahamsson, 1977; Eriksson, 1994; Gullberg, 1972; Larsson and Magdalenic, 2015; Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006; Wisselgren, 1997). Given sociologists' preoccupation with the making of classics, Steffen is an interesting case as he is the only domestic candidate that Sweden has ever had from the 'classical period' of sociology (Wagner, 1991). For the past century, however, no single text of Steffen's oeuvre has been recognised as a classic in Sweden or elsewhere, even though some have proposed that it could have been.

Before systematically examining whether Baehr's four-factor framework can help us explain why this pioneering contribution to Swedish sociology has never been recognised as a classic, a biography of Steffen's academic life and production is provided to provide context to the reader.

The 'forgotten father' of Swedish sociology

Gustaf F. Steffen was born in 1864 in Stockholm and remained in Sweden until the age of 20, when he moved to Berlin to pursue studies in physics, chemistry and, mineralogy (Lilliestam, 1960: 17–18). In 1887, Steffen exchanged Germany for England, where he spent a total of ten years conducting a form of journalism he called 'descriptive sociology' (Steffen, 1893: V–VI). During his London years, Steffen also published two books on British culture and economy and wrote a paper on sociology as a science, which includes a critique of what he regarded as overly mechanistic and biological accounts of society. Further, he met with prominent academics and political theoreticians, such as Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, and Peter Kropotkin. Thereafter, Steffen left for Florence, where he wrote two additional books on Great Britain and a wide range of articles – his application of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on Leonardo da Vinci illustrates the breadth of Steffen's areas of interests (Lilliestam, 1960: 78). In 1900, Steffen worked as a private lecturer at the University of Rostock, and two years later earned a doctorate for his dissertation on the English economy (Lilliestam, 1960: 87–89). The following year, after almost two decades abroad, Steffen – who was then 39 years old – was appointed the first Chair in Economics and Sociology at the University of Gothenburg (Lilliestam, 1960: 89).¹

Between 1905 and 1912, Steffen published his six-volume *Social studies: Attempts to illuminate the social development of today* (1905–1912), covering a myriad of historical, political, and economic issues scrutinised from a sociological angle, but aimed at 'readers with a "social reformist mindset"' (Wisselgren, 1997: 100). During this time, he attended the lectures of Georg Simmel and began a mail correspondence with him. Steffen published his critique of Simmel in a book named *Sociology: Its object and problem* (1907). Alongside this, he continued his work on England, this time in a book focusing on its democratisation process. Following this work, Steffen wrote three books on the history of materialism (1913–1914), dealing with Kant, Marx, and previous thinkers, making up what has been referred to as Steffen's 'philosophical authorship' (Lilliestam, 1960: 152). In 1910 and 1911, Steffen transformed the 71 pages he initially wrote on the science of sociology into 787 pages spanning four volumes, entitled *Sociology: A general theory of society*. Later in the paper, I will look deeper into this book series, which is suggested to be Steffen's best candidate to have become a classic.

Parallel with his professorship, Steffen also served as commissioner for the Social democratic workers' party of Sweden and was appointed in a few smaller and larger state-commissioned inquiries, such as the *Swedish emigration commission* (Lilliestam, 1960: 225ff). In 1915, the political party expelled Steffen due to his alleged sympathies with Germany in WWI. This position is articulated in what by 1918 would become a four-volume collection of 'social-psychological documents' entitled *War and culture* (Steffen, 1914: v). While Swedish academics have interpreted the book series as mainly an ideological and political product (e.g. Eriksson, 1994), it was earlier received as a contribution to 'the sociology of war' by international sociologists (Becker et al., 1952: 948).

The same year, 1918, Steffen published the first of three parts of an equally ambitious book series, this time more than 1400 pages in Swedish, on the general evolution of society and culture (with a focus on comparing Egypt, Greece, and Sweden) – from prehistoric time, through the Middle Ages and ending in modern time – under the title *The ages of the world*. Previous scholars have accentuated how it is a ‘purely evolutionary work in the spirit of positivism’ that is ‘strange ... [and] without any real sociological value’ (Wisselgren, 1997: 105–106). *The ages of the world* seems, however, to have been surprisingly well-received by at least some Swedish intellectuals, enjoying statements like ‘Here is not only overwhelming knowledge accumulated during a lifetime of study, not only acumen and independent thinking, but also creative imagination that through the mighty bulk has formed a living reality’ (Marcus, 1921: 656). According to previous scholars (e.g. Eriksson, 1994; Wisselgren, 1997), Steffen’s legacy is mostly remembered by these two book series. Yet, for the record, Steffen published one final book in 1927 dealing with democracy and power politics.

Throughout his institutionalised academic career, which started when he became a professor in 1903 and continued until his passing in 1929, the bulk of his works were translated from Swedish into German and often printed in second as well as third editions in both languages. Steffen also corresponded continuously with several prominent social scientists in the Nordic countries and Germany – Ferdinand Tönnies, Werner Sombart, Alfred Vierkandt, Gustav von Schmoller, Lujo Brentano, and Max Sering, to mention a few – and in England – for instance, Edvard Westermarck, Philip Wicksteed, and Irving Fischer – as well as scholars seated in Austria, France, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, and the USA.²

Steffen’s position prevented him from dedicating himself fully to sociology and he was dissatisfied in Gothenburg, which he referred to as a ‘provincial town’ unsuited for him (Lilliestam, 1960: 202). Despite 25 years of trying, Steffen neither managed to transform his Chair in Economics and Sociology to one solely in sociology nor to get a chair at a larger and more influential university in Sweden or Germany, with documented attempts including Stockholm, Hamburg, Berlin, and Cologne (Lilliestam, 1960: 200, 233, 262). What remains is a neglected legacy in a pile of dusty books.

It is worth noting that Steffen seems to fit all categories of the typical canonised classic proposed in postcolonial thought (e.g. Bhabra, 2016; Connell, 1997). He was a privileged white male with a Eurocentric gaze who could dedicate his time to intellectual endeavours and managed to access key international networks and discourses, which ultimately led him to secure one of the first professorships in sociology in a Western country. Nevertheless, Steffen’s work is neglected, making the puzzle of this paper even more intriguing. So, let us return to the problem spelt out at the beginning of the paper – let us explore and examine whether the tools provided by Baehr (2002) to explain why classicity occurs can account for why it does not.

Neglecting a magnum opus with textual suppleness

According to Baehr (2002: 127), ‘texts, theories and authors must enjoy a chameleon capacity if they are to become and remain classic’, i.e. have textual suppleness. A classic needs the capacity of ‘a sense of play, paradox and ambiguity’ as it allows for several interpretations and further adoptions to prolong its existence (Baehr, 2002: 125). For instance, Durkheim’s work has been deemed fascist, conservative, liberal, and socialist. Further, textual suppleness also entails that the life work of a classic should be bulky, both in mere quantitative measures and in ‘range, scope, and the rhetorical figures employed’ (Baehr, 2002: 125). The work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels encapsulates no less than 41 volumes, Weber around 33 volumes, and Simmel about 25 volumes. As the authors’ texts were written over long periods and on various topics, they open up for several interpretations and, if you wish, versions or stages of the work – such as ‘young Marx’ and ‘old Marx’. There, the object of this classic factor seems not to be authors or generally accepted readings of the theories they developed, but instead the written texts in themselves – both the variety of the complete work and the style of key publications.

Steffen’s published lifework is voluminous, consisting of more than 20 books, a wide range of articles in Swedish and German magazines, as well as a good number of unpublished manuscripts, lectures,

letters, and journals – all accessible in Steffen’s archive. Further, Steffen was preoccupied not only with sociology but also with history, psychology, pedagogics, aesthetics, and social-democratic political thought, to mention only a few topics. Steffen’s work varies greatly depending on whether one reads his texts on the epistemology of sociology, the history of the English wage system, observations of everyday culture, analyses of civilisation, or reformist thoughts on the Swedish educational system.

According to the literature, Steffen’s version of sociology deals with problems similar to those of the current established European classics. For instance, historian Lilliestam (1960: 272), who wrote his PhD dissertation on Steffen’s life and work, states that it offers a synthesis for the social sciences and develops an epistemology as well as a methodology specific for sociology. Another historian and sociologist, Wisselgren (1997: 80, 109), a specialist in the history of social science in Sweden, further suggests that Steffen’s ideas are typical for the intellectual landscape at the turn of the 20th century in trying to make an epistemological move ‘away from a positivistic ideal towards an idealistic conceptualisation of society’, positioning his work within the “‘social evolutionary” school’ by drawing on the ‘methodological traditions’ of ‘Comte and Spencer’, in contrast to the “‘Durkheimian”, “Weberian” and “Marxist” schools’. Many scholars have stressed this line of evolutionism and social reformist mindset that runs through Steffen’s lifework, for instance, calling him ‘the Swedish Hobhouse’ (Becker et al., 1952: 948) and a contemporary of Lester F. Ward (Lilliestam, 1960: 178, 190).

Steffen’s complete oeuvre seems to cover the mere quantitative measurement of textual suppleness and to be attuned to the discourse of classical sociology. As for investigating the more qualitative aspect of textual suppleness, we would, however, need a deeper analysis of the best possible candidate for a classic text for reaching classicality. In the case of Steffen, it is his ‘scientific “magnum opus”’ (Wisselgren, 1997: 102), the four-volume *Sociology: A general theory of society* (1910–1911). To investigate its potential textual suppleness in the sense of whether it can open up for multiple interpretations, I will summarise the previous scholarly accounts of the book series as well as offer my reading.

Lilliestam (1960: 149–151) states that Steffen’s *Sociology* is an attempt to make sociology out of Henri Bergson’s epistemological critique of positivism, a position he reached after first combining a sociological reading of Friedrich Nietzsche’s social philosophy and Wilhelm Wundt’s psychology. This combination entails a departure from Steffen’s penfriend Georg Simmel by launching a firmer social-psychological rejection of all materialism, which Steffen later argued that both the Kantian and Hegelian branches of sociology suffered from Lilliestam (1960: 160, 272–273). In contrast, the sociologist of knowledge Eriksson (1994: 50–51) suggests that the book series is a critique of ‘August Comte’s mechanism and Herbert Spencer’s biologism’ by emphasising that ‘the future was in principal uncertain and that the free will of humans played a significant role in its development’. Yet a third interpretation is presented by Wisselgren (1997: 99ff) and formalised in his work with historian Larsson (Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006: 162), stating that the work rests on two pillars: ‘on the one hand, a theory of social interaction, inspired by Simmel and “forgotten sociologist” Gabriel Tarde, and on the other, a strong commitment to evolutionary thinking, where he was influenced by Spencer and Bergson’. Here, we end up with a fluctuating and divided world based on a dualistic ontology of life-matter, where the natural sciences use intellect to study the latter and sociology intuition to attain knowledge of the former by studying the evolution of ‘society from “within”’ (Wisselgren, 1997: 103).

To stress the ‘chameleon capacity’ of the book series (Baehr, 2002: 127), I wish to suggest yet another understanding based on my deep reading that diverges from evolutionism. A key reference in the work is indeed Finnish sociologist Edvard Westermarck, ‘the world’s first sociobiologist’ (Sanderson, 2018), yet as Becker et al. (1952: 947) early pointed out: for Steffen, ‘society is not an organism, nor anything remotely like it, but simply a network of relations between persons’. This relational approach can be traced to another principal reference, Simmel (e.g. Lilliestam, 1960: 129–130), as well as to Tarde. While this aspect of Steffen’s work has been hinted at by previous interpreters, conceiving Steffen’s work as a contribution to the growing literature on relational sociology (see Dépelteau, 2017) even further underlines its textual suppleness.

Throughout the book series, we find statements that entail processual thinking and reject substance metaphysics, like society is ‘a constant becoming’ and ‘social life’s... substance – whatever we might mean with such expressions – is as little something unchangeable as its external forms, its organisation, its laws, its numeric conditions’ (Steffen, 1910: 96). Further, an ontology of interdependent relations can be grasped when Steffen (1910: 182) claims that ‘society is not a detached entity, not something impersonal that creates personalities, but the relationship between personalities from which they are created and create themselves.’ By merging the sociological works of Simmel and Tarde, both regarded as relational sociologists today (Dépelteau, 2017: 63ff, 201ff), with the psychology of Wundt, Steffen offers a social psychology of how interaction events emerge, which resonates surprisingly well with the American ‘founders of pragmatic sociology’ and today’s classics of symbolic interactionism (Schubert, 2006), George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, where at least the former has been argued to be a relational sociologist (Dépelteau, 2017: 101ff). Like Steffen, both were inspired by the work of Simmel, and all three draw on the pragmatism of William James (Levine et al., 1976; Steffen, 1911a: 398), who expressed sympathies for Bergson’s thinking but opposed Wundt’s (Pitkin, 1910).

But the work also includes ideas beyond evolutionism and social psychology underplayed in the previous interpretations. Steffen (1910: 13) states that ‘life is a synthesis of consciousness and materiality’ and that society has a fluctuating ‘psycho-physical nature’, which entails an attempt to overcome dualist thinking. This leads Steffen (1911b: 644–645, 648, 654) to the argument that sociology must generate ‘subject-object knowledge’ that is ‘always simultaneously quantitative and qualitative’ and, thus, must trespass the traditional academic boundary separating ‘studies of bodily and mental phenomena’. In practice, sociology must both utilise ‘the extended historical or evolutionary method’ and ‘the psychological method’ (Steffen, 1911b: 742). For instance, in the case of explaining values, the sociologist cannot solely rely on idealism ‘seen on the surface’, but must include material relationships, including their own since they ‘cannot completely escape the obsessions and biases, which characterise [their] own social position and [their] own society’s social developmental mode’ (Steffen, 1911a: 390–391).

This underplayed aspect of *Sociology* seems to resonate with ‘the early dispute between the elder Gabriel Tarde and Émile Durkheim, the winner’ (Latour, 2005: 13) and the latter’s alternative sociology, which today is carried on through the likes of Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze (Dépelteau, 2017: 63ff, 145ff, 183ff) under the common label ‘material semiotics’. This school draws on a Tardean root that conceptualises ‘the social as a circulating fluid’ and sociology as ‘a kind of inter-psychology’ that and does not ‘separate “the social” from other associations like biological organisms’ nor ‘break with philosophy’ (Latour, 2005: 13).

Based on the previous interpretations as well as my appraisal of *Sociology: A general theory of society*, Steffen’s text seems to have textual suppleness in the sense that Baehr argues to be typical for classics. How this relates to the book’s chances of becoming a classic is up for debate. The optimist might argue that Steffen’s ‘search for holistic thinking between society and nature’ suggests a ‘renewed timeliness’ and the pessimist that there is an ‘eclectic feature in his thinking’ (Lilliestam, 1960: 173). In any case, the high textual suppleness of Steffen’s lifework and his book series *Sociology* has not been sufficient for either to reach some form of classicity. Thus, we must ask ourselves whether a multiplicity of possible interpretations is an advantage in and of itself, or whether textual suppleness only makes sense for already established classics.

Reader appropriation and neglect of theories

Baehr (2002: 127) states that reader appropriation refers to when an author’s ideas either are integrated within an intellectual milieu or are faced with selective repudiation. In both cases, the appropriation involves hermeneutical activities and consistency building (e.g. translating a language or vocabulary to fit a context). As each reader or community will perceive a different set of gaps in every single theory, the activity of consistency building ‘enables a sustained dispute between readers while allowing all of them to claim authority in the text itself’ (Baehr, 2002: 129). Think about the translation of Karl

Mannheim's *Ideologie und Utopie* from 1929 into English in 1936, which has been interpreted as an attempt to clear its neo-Kantian and post-Hegelian allusions – *geist* becomes *mind*, *bewusstsein* becomes *mental activity*, and so on – to fit another 'context of mental imagery and assumptions' (Baehr, 2002: 128). Thus, this factor seems to target how a theory reaches classicality through appropriation rather than a text or the author as such.

As I have already stated, there has been no recognised appropriation of Steffen's work to date. It has either been overseen or remembered for the author's 'strong commitment to evolutionary theory' rather than his 'theory of social interaction' (Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006: 162). Considering how vital social psychology has been to Swedish sociology for the last 70 years (e.g. Larsson and Magdalenic, 2015), this is puzzling. The turn away from quantitative and neo-positivism in the 1960s, accentuated in what is commonly named 'the soft data debate' (see Eriksson, 1977), could have meant appropriations of Steffen's contributions, but instead, *The Hidden Society* (1965) by the Norwegian 'father of sociology', Vilhelm Aubert, played the role of 'exemplar' for qualitative sociology (Eriksson, 1977: 3ff).

One of the most important propagators for the turn to qualitative and interpretive sociology in Sweden, Asplund (1978), chose to enforce the classical status of Aubert, Ferdinand Tönnies, and, with most devotion, George Herbert Mead (see Eriksson, 1977). As argued for above concerning textual suppleness, Steffen's and Mead's work shares a vital pragmatist root (e.g. Schubert, 2006), drawing on the philosophy of William James, and are both explicitly inspired by Wundt as well as Bergson (Pitkin, 1910). However, while an array of American pragmatists, particularly those referred to as symbolic interactionists, have made a comeback not only in American sociology but worldwide (Fine, 1993), Steffen continues to be the 'forgotten father' of Swedish sociology. Considering the rich textual suppleness of his work, Baehr gives an unsatisfactory answer to why Steffen's theory neither has been appropriated nor is a classic today.

Texts generating cultural resonance and dissonance

Baehr (2002: 123) proposes that works must be able to generate cultural resonance to become classics since they are dependent on collective support to survive and, thus, benefit from having appeal and utility for cultural projects. One example is how Georg Simmel's writings were revitalised through the institutionalisation of sociology in the USA (e.g. Levine et al., 1976). For Baehr (2002: 124), 'the greatest impediment to a text's elevation is not hostility, but indifference', thus, there is also a possibility to acquire 'cultural resonance through notoriety' by sparking controversy. Think Émile Durkheim's *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique* from 1895, which has been a reference point in sociology for almost a century, even if most commentators have highlighted its shortcomings (Gane, 2010). Like the first factor textual suppleness, cultural resonance appears to target texts, but the focus has now shifted towards the external (rather than internal) aspect of installing classicality.

Steffen's work has not been adopted by any known cultural project – suggesting a textbook case of indifference. Yet as will be shown, it seemed to have been well-received during his lifetime but became subject to an antithetical discussion decades after his passing, the details of which I will address more thoroughly under the next heading. The question for Baehr's framework then becomes whether the case of Steffen entails a need to address 'cultural dissonance' besides notorious cultural resonance.

Looking into the philosophical discipline from which sociology in Sweden emerged (Pfannenstill, 1987), Bergson's ideas seem to have circulated in Swedish academia during the first part of the 20th century (e.g. Aspelin, 1937: 236). Also, most of Steffen's other key references are represented in the curriculum of the philosophy faculty of the biggest university in Sweden, Uppsala University, during the years Steffen's *Sociology* was published.³ It is worth noting that this is the very same university, faculty, and subject in which the first sole Chair in Sociology was established some 30 years later.

There is moreover evidence that Steffen was read internationally. Steffen's *Sociology* is dedicated to sociologist Franz Oppenheimer, who together with and a few other contemporary German sociologists expressed their impressions of the work in letters sent to Steffen (Lilliestam, 1960: 151). Steffen

translated nearly all of his books into German and corresponded regularly with well-recognised German classics such as Simmel, Tönnies, and Sombart. Further, in a book published in 1945 that presents the history of sociology to Finnish universities, Steffen is mentioned as 'the only proper Swedish sociologist' (Karsten, 1945: 6, 177). Lastly, two prominent American sociologists stated in the late 1930s that 'sociology owes whatever academic standing it now has in the Scandinavian countries [to] Gustaf F. Steffen', 'an outstanding economist, sociologist, and political leader' (Becker et al., 1952: 942, 947).

Looking outside academia, scholars have shown that there was a good interest in the study of 'the social' at this time in Sweden (e.g. Wisselgren, 1997). For instance, numerous societies and seminars dedicated to sociology were set up during this period (e.g. Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006: 165), milieus in which both philosophers and social scientists participated. Steffen was a well-regarded politician and scientist, who, as previously mentioned, was appointed in several public inquiries, and appeared in Swedish journals – e.g. the important social democrat journal *Tiden* from 1910 until 1940. Further, he was highly esteemed by public intellectuals, such as the Swedish 'sociologist of the social movement' Thörnberg (1925: 194), and Henriksson-Holmberg (1923: 50), who discussed Steffen alongside sociological authors such as Ludwig Gumplowicz and James Q. Dealey.

However, some Swedish scholars have argued that Steffen promoted a revisionist, liberal, and anti-Marxist brand of socialism that did not resonate well with the labour movement in his time (Gullberg, 1972: 15–17) and that his 'personal failure to gain a foothold among the emerging power groups on the political left contributed to lowering the prestige of sociology in Sweden' (Boalt and Abrahamsson, 1977: 102–103). Thus, since controversy here seems to be harmful, it might be useful for Baehr's framework to also consider cultural dissonance. To illustrate, Eriksson (1994: 54) accentuates two of Steffen's 'faux pas' to unravel why his work has not been part of the official history of Swedish sociology: first, actively supporting the German engagement in WWI – this and his fondness for the German culture is expressed clearly in his book series *War and Culture* (Steffen, 1914) – and, second, his turn from Bergson towards the 'evolutionistic mechanistic perspective' found in *The ages of the world*, where, in my reading, the Germanic peoples are elevated and argued to bear the crown of modernity (Steffen, 1918). The latter is sustained by Wisselgren (1997: 106), who has presented that Steffen is foremost remembered for his 1918–1920 'purely evolutionistic work in the spirit of positivism [...] equipped with nationalistic tendencies'.

To push Baehr's framework to its limits, let us quickly compare Steffen's unfortunate destiny with that of the recognised classic Shōichi Toyama, the initial recipient of Japan's first Chair in Sociology, established in 1893 (e.g. Yazawa, 2014). Shogo (1976: 8) suggests that Toyama is also predominantly known for proposing an 'organic conception of society in support of a conservative and pragmatic approach' that was 'possessed with such nationalistic ideas'. Further, Japanese sociology undertook a turn similar to that of Swedish sociology after WWII – exchanging European epistemology for American (e.g. Boalt and Abrahamsson, 1977) – and Toyama was neglected but became re-introduced as a national pioneer in the general narrative of Japanese sociology decades later (see Baehr, 2002: 134–135). While Toyama's work has been described as mainly a translation of Spencer's sociology to fit a Japanese context (e.g. Steiner, 1936), Steffen's sociology, as suggested above, is more open for multiple interpretations and, therefore, seems to have higher textual suppleness. So, why is Toyama a classic and not Steffen when they seem to share a similar type of cultural resonance?

One problem is that depending on how culture is viewed, one could both argue that Steffen's work did resonate well with different intellectual milieu or that it generated dissonance. The relativity of the matter suggests that the notion of cultural resonance is perhaps only able to explain classicality after it is already in place. From the viewpoint of Steffen, sociology was a global social science in contrast to one like economics that was nationally oriented, and his letters suggest that his compass was directed towards participating in any larger academic circles in Swedish social science or German sociology (Lilliestam, 1960: 200, 233, 262). The potential significance of a life circumstance where Steffen could dedicate all his work on sociology for his work's cultural resonance in Sweden and beyond is, nevertheless, an open question. This leads to a broader philosophical question with methodological implications, namely to what extent

we can (and should) separate authors from their texts in cases where personal political views are in dissonance with the cultural setting. From a sociological perspective, however, what matters is to what extent future generations will elevate or reject the legacy.

Negating an author's social transmission and diffusion

Baehr (2002: 129) sketches two transmission paths for works to rise to classicality through social diffusion. The most obvious path is the institutional transmission, where a scholar is a scientific leader or essential reference of a school of thought that becomes a central part of sociological education and/or research. For instance, Durkheim became the personification of structural functionalism. Baehr's (2002: 129) second type of social diffusion is interstitial transmission paths, whereby a few admirers commit to and promote a text. Max Weber's status as a classic can be explained as an interstitial transmission by background figures such as Marianne Weber and sociologists like Karl Mannheim, Alfred Schütz, and, perhaps most importantly, Talcott Parsons (Baehr, 2002: 129, 135). It, therefore, looks like Baehr here refers to occasions where authors (above their texts or theories) become classics.

Despite proof that Steffen's work was acknowledged nationally and internationally, no institutional paths of transmission were opened during his lifetime. If you recall, Steffen never managed to get a chair at a German university, nor did he manage to translate his Chair in Economics and Sociology to one in sociology or get a position at another Swedish university (Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006; Lilliestam, 1960: 200, 233, 262; Thörnberg, 1925: 194).

Regarding interstitial transmission, some forms of institutionalisation can also be a deadly threat for an aspiring classics reputation, especially so if one is the only leader of a school and therefore the primary target of an antagonist. Baehr (2002: 133) writes that 'Parsons was always more than the bogeyman of normative functionalism', which explains why his work has survived 'theoretical annihilation' and 'the majority of theoretical synthesis in sociology continue to confront it'. However, as was suggested above, despite the textual suppleness of Steffen's work, it seems to have been annihilated by a similar form of negation to the one Parsons' work faced and survived from. Since Baehr does not thoroughly discuss this kind of problem, we will have to theorise on the basis of potential negators of Steffen's work that might have blocked its potential institutional and interstitial paths for social transmission.

According to my argument, a satisfactory theory of the whole classicality process must be able to differentiate the formation of classics from the neglect of non-classics. Hence, we will have to expand on Baehr's framework to unravel this problem by introducing 'neglection processes'. Eriksson (1994: 53) uncovers that, while Steffen was acknowledged as a pioneering sociologist *outside* sociology, he was actively removed from *within* sociology through the history constructed by his disciplinary colleges. During the period after WWII, a new academic sociology was pushed forward that should be 'empirical rather than speculative, American rather than Continental, quantitative rather than qualitative', where Steffen came to personify the negation of the three dichotomies (Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006: 171). A key negator was a professor in practical philosophy, Torgny T. Segerstedt, who played a significant role in forming the first department of sociology in Sweden in 1947 along with the first single Chair in Sociology and became its first holder.

In comparison to Sweden's first sociology professor, Larsson and Wisselgren (2006: 167ff) explain how the second had unprecedented power in determining who would get the influential academic positions in Swedish sociology and was strategic in gathering a satisfying group of like-minded to draw from. Less than 20 years later, Sweden had five sociology departments, each led by a harmonious professor, which certainly informed Finnish sociologist Allardt's (1973: 55) observation that 'Swedish sociology's view on man and society have been consistently present from Torgny Segerstedt, the Nestor of Swedish sociology, down to the younger generations of sociologists'. Eriksson (1994: 45) shows how Segerstedt continued to degrade the reputation of Steffen's sociology throughout his life, for instance, by presenting him as a journalist that became a teacher influenced by Bergson, by stating that he was 'not interested in occupying himself with heavy data collection', and by reducing his scientific contribution to *The ages of the world*.

The example of Segerstedt's antithetical reading of Steffen's work suggests the importance of negators for the future formation or neglect of a potential classic. However, the peculiarity of Steffen's case is that no interstitial paths of transmission have been opened over the last 100 years, even though Steffen's disappearance from the history of sociology in Sweden has been brought to light for nearly half a century (Boalt and Abrahamsson, 1977).

Conclusion

Classicality is a principal part of sociology, whether we like it or not, and, thus, calls for reflexive scholarly attention. In light of this, Baehr (2002: 111) produced a framework with the ambition to answer 'How did the specific body of text that we today call "classics" come to be recognized as such? And, further, why did some texts achieve that status while others did not?' While Baehr (2002: 146–147) does reassure his readers that 'the quest for fixed criteria of classicality is probably a hopeless task', his book is an attempt to develop 'an analytical schema that enables us to understand *sociologically* [...] why and how a determinate text achieved "classic" status' based on advances made in several fields related to studies of classicality that is well-cited and continuously re-published. In other words, Baehr's efforts offer us at the very least a basis upon which we can reflect on the state of the art. It is because of this that I chose his work when inquiring into what 'forgotten sociologists' can tell us about the phenomenon of classicality. After pondering some of the potential reasons why the wide ranging and novel work of Sweden's first professor of sociology Gustaf F. Steffen is not deemed to be a classic, I wanted to explore whether the application of Baehr's framework to his case might offer plausible explanations.

Since Baehr's framework draws almost exclusively on the formation of already established classics, the research question guiding this paper has been whether the particularistic learnings of success stories can give the full picture of the classic formation process. Based on the findings of the analysis presented above, the short answer is no, since the cases of 'remembered sociologists' do not satisfactorily differentiate from the case of the 'forgotten sociologist'. At first glance, Baehr gives the reader a key to a shed filled with ready-made tools for scrutinising empirical cases of classicality. However, when comparing 'formation processes' with 'neglection processes', there are unfortunately overlaps stemming from undertheorised methodological concerns.

One crucial issue is how to define a 'classic'. Baehr (2002: 147) does no analytical effort to distinguish its, in his own words, 'multiple, stratified meanings', but settles with using terms such as author, text, and theory interchangeably to represent his primary study object of classicality. For canonised classics, this issue can easily be seen as the whole package being elevated to sociology's chamber of giants after the 'consecration ritual', to paraphrase Bourdieu (1988). When looking at the results of the present investigation, this ambiguity is less satisfying, since Steffen's failure to become recognised as a classic can make perfect sense or no sense at all, depending on which aspect of the classicality trio (i.e. author, texts, or theories) is emphasised. Previous research on 'Steffen the author' has already provided a rather clear picture of why he did not succeed in becoming a renowned sociologist during his lifetime until the middle of the 20th century (Boalt and Abrahamsson, 1977; Eriksson, 1994; Gullberg, 1972; Larsson and Magdalenic, 2015; Larsson and Wisselgren, 2006; Wisselgren, 1997). However, the reason why Steffen's texts and theories, in particular *Sociology: A general theory of society* and the innovative theory it encapsulates, remain neglected remains unclear.

As stated in the introduction, I still believe that this type of history of sociology driven by the sociology of knowledge insights is a fruitful undertaking, since it will give us a reflexive conception of the constitution of our discipline. Thus, I contend that much could be gained by addressing the knowledge gaps that this paper has exposed instead of abandoning Baehr's vision. Two initial steps in this direction are, first, to continue the path that I have set out here and analyse 'neglection processes' and compare these results with previous studies of 'formation processes' and, second, to treat authors, texts, and theories as

separate but entangled entities, where each entity has to be resurrected through communication (with other authors, texts, and theories).

Some initial consequences of the suggested enhanced scope of classicality have already been uncovered in the analysis of Steffen's work. For one, the factor 'cultural resonance' must also include instances where texts generate destructive 'dissonance'. Further, the social position of appropriators of an entity seems to be key, an aspect that is briefly mentioned by Baehr, but unfortunately is severely underplayed in his framework. Even more absent is the role 'negators' can play in labelling an entity 'not worthy of attention' and how this label can decrease its potential of being appropriated by the generations to come, which is exposed in the analysis and expansion of the factor 'social transmission and diffusion' presented above. This argument resonates well with Camic's (1992: 440) 'reputational model', stating that 'the choice among possible predecessors is heavily contingent on the beliefs and opinions prevalent in the scholar's local network'. For instance, one can imagine that the affinity of powerful thinkers like Émile Durkheim towards Edvard Westermarck helped to reduce the latter to just 'a 19th-century evolutionist', overshadowing the explanatory merits of his theories, when 'the functionalistic paradigm supplanted the comparative one' (Pipping, 1982: 348, 353).

By acknowledging both formation and neglection processes, and by emphasising that no author, text, or theory is fixed – not even the seemingly immortal canon – classicality becomes a dynamic social phenomenon. To paraphrase Steffen, this is a step away from representing sociology in a static-mechanic manner and towards discovering the patterns of its constant movement and changeability. This switch can open up several new avenues of research questions, such as whether an author's style of expression and the epistemological utility of the language through which a theory is presented might play a part in formation as well as neglection processes. Nevertheless, the provisional insights offered in this paper enable us to further endeavours to examine the reasons behind why sociology came to be what it is and not something else.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that sociology was not deemed to be a discipline of its own in Sweden back then, but rather part of an overarching social science (Wisselgren, 1997). At the time Steffen served as a professor, candidates for a doctoral degree in either economics or sociology had to pass the exams in both disciplines (Becker et al., 1952: 942).
2. A register over the content of Steffen's archive provided by a filing clerk has verified that these correspondences took place.
3. See, for instance, page 152–155 in *Filosofiska fakultetensstudiehandbok*. (1912). Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

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