

Social Psychology Quarterly

<http://spq.sagepub.com/>

Classics in What Sense?

Charles Camic

Social Psychology Quarterly 2008 71: 324

DOI: 10.1177/019027250807100402

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://spq.sagepub.com/content/71/4/324>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



American Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Social Psychology Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://spq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://spq.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Dec 1, 2008

[What is This?](#)

Classics in What Sense?

CHARLES CAMIC

Northwestern University

They seem the perfect bookends for the social psychologist's collection of "classics" of the field. Two volumes, nearly identical in shape and weight and exactly a century old in 2008—each professing to usher "social psychology" into the world as they both place the hybrid expression square in their titles but then proceed to stake out the field in divergent ways that presage the rift between the "two social psychologies" which would characterize the 100 years ahead. A more apt start for the Janus-faced enterprise is hard to imagine than this co-appearance of psychologist William McDougall's *An Introduction to Social Psychology*, with its hollow treatment of "the social," and sociologist's Edward Alsworth Ross's *Social Psychology: An Outline and Source Book*, where "the psychological" is a cipher.

This historical co-occurrence has long furnished the stuff for tidy origin stories about social psychology as a field. Yet, examining the two books today, the question inevitably arises as to whether they still merit attention for any reason beyond the plain fact of their arrival in the same calendar year under the banner of "social psychology." For the contemporary reader is hardly surprised to see that—in 1908, as in almost any year since—the psychologist's social psychology is less sociologically far-reaching than the sociologist's, or that the sociologist's approach to social psychology accentuates social forces far more heavily than psychological processes. Beyond confirming notions about the deeply rooted bifurcation of social psychology, however, McDougall's *Introduction* and Ross's *Social Psychology* initially seem to confound expectations for works that have attained the status of classics.

To see why this is so, a few comments about how works from the past achieve classical standing may be helpful. These comments require, however, the caveat that no general-

ization on this topic fits all cases because "classic" is a highly heterogeneous category. In some academic disciplines, for example, scholars expressly brand classics *as classics* only to leave them largely unread; scholars in other disciplines eschew the label of classic but have constant recourse, nevertheless, to certain canonical earlier writings. What is more, the works that enter the classic category, through either of these scenarios or others, may range in format from synthetic theoretical treatises (Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Marshall's *Principles of Economics*), through sharply focused empirical monographs (Durkheim's *Suicide*, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Goffman's *Presentation of Self*), down to textbooks for virtual beginners (Gray's *Anatomy*, Samuelson's *Economics*, Sutherland's *Criminology*, Kroeber's *Anthropology*)¹—textbooks providing the rubric under which McDougall and Ross both issued their books in 1908.

Of greater usefulness, however, than brand or format in appraising these two volumes at the present time are some of the *different intellectual justifications* that lead scholars of a later period—scholars in the social sciences at any rate—to confer classical status upon an earlier treatise, monograph, or textbook. Typically, social scientists will adduce one of three grounds for including a work among the enduring classics of their field. The first is a justification that empirical researchers often invoke and that receives perhaps its clearest expression in Robert Merton's famous essay "On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory" (1968). According to this justification, a work from the past commands present-day attention insofar as it informs the contemporary intellectual

¹ I take these textbook examples from Merton (1971:vii).

agenda, whether by delineating “still unsolved problems” of persisting concern, furnishing “unretrieved information” or “theoretical leads” with which to address those problems, or otherwise “instruct[ing] today’s scientist in the current operating theory, methodology or technique of his science” (Merton 1968:30, 35, 3).

By this standard of current relevance, however, McDougall and Ross continually disappoint, as their ideas are distinctly out of sync with contemporary social psychology. This is even more the case for Ross’s work than McDougall’s, painful though it is for a sociologist to admit this difference. Occasionally McDougall (1908) develops a line of argument that actually speaks with some pertinence to present-day concerns, as he does with his critique of economics for its “crude psychological assumptions” (10–12), his proto-Meadian account of the socialization process and “the social genesis of the idea of self [that] lies at the root of morality” (180ff.), his analysis of the centrality of emotions and habits in human conduct (45–89), and—perhaps most notably—his explicit effort to combine determinism and voluntarism, psychological causation and human agency. Invariably, however, these occasional arguments pale before the antiquated larger message that McDougall wishes to convey about the primacy of innate human instincts like pugnacity, gregariousness, curiosity, self-assertion, acquisition, and flight as he presses his signature thesis that such “instincts are the prime movers of all human activity,” “the mental forces that maintain and shape all the life of individuals and societies” (44).

Even as present-day natural scientists increasingly come forth with claims about the social significance of humankind’s genetic and neuronal constitution, this overarching thesis of McDougall’s *Introduction* appears as an intellectual relic not only for the large number of highly specific instincts that it postulates, but also for the flights of reductionist fancy that McDougall pursues to demonstrate the societal consequences of these instincts—such as the proposition that the “accumulation of material wealth [that is] necessary for the progress of civilisation” derives from “the

instinct of acquisition” (322). In these ways, among others, McDougall-1908 shares little similarity with the current agenda of social psychology, and when one turns to Ross-1908, the discrepancy becomes even more striking. Despite his emphasis on innate instincts, McDougall at least allows that human beings are social to the core inasmuch as their instinctual propensities are everywhere canalized by the “social environment” (15–18), whereas Ross’s text continually backslides to the hoary dichotomy of society versus the heroic *pre-social* individual. Indeed, Ross’s *Social Psychology* mainly consists of an elaborate morality play in which independent, well-educated, manly individuals of Western stock, strong in reason and intellect, form their own judgments and chart their own courses of action, while lesser social types live by “mass suggestion” (63) and “blind imitation” (292), accepting beliefs with “illegitimate origins” in social customs and conventions (111), and succumbing to the “mental contagion” (83) of “riotous mobs,” crazes, fashions, and crowds (49)—the last, “the lowest form of association” (56), a seething emotional cauldron that is “unstable, credulous, irrational, and immoral” (62).

It is a telling measure of the distance between Ross’s intellectual milieu and our own that this jeremiad at the heart of his book no longer finds support among social psychologists. Every element of it—from its asocial conception of attributes like independence, reason, and ego-strength to its astructural conception of crowds and other episodes of collective behavior—has long since given way before multiple traditions of social scientific theory and research. The magnitude of this distance, however, renders Ross’s volume, as well as McDougall’s manifesto for instinct psychology, problematic as classical texts insofar as one expects a classic of social psychology to lend some guidance on “the current operating theory, methodology or technique” (Merton 1968:30) of the field.

This first criterion, though, is not the only accepted standard for classical canonization. To follow Merton again, a work from the past merits classic status not only when it directly address specific issues on a field’s current

agenda, but also when it manifests to readers “penetrating” qualities of mind, which provide a lasting “model for intellectual work [and help] to form standards of taste and judgment” about what constitutes good scholarship (1968:36). Viewed according to this second criterion, however, McDougall’s and Ross’s texts of 1908 appear no more worthy than they do by the first criterion, though McDougall’s claims again are a bit stronger. This is so because McDougall, to the extent that he keeps to his preferred subject of instincts, does present the reader with an exceptional feat of reasoning and theory building as he skillfully layers one well-crafted argument upon the next and the next, working up from the simple to the increasingly complex, precisely defining every concept and specifying its relation to other terms, quickly perceiving loose threads and knotting them up, anticipating likely objections and defusing them, and following up on each deferred question to which he promises to return. If only all these skills were in the service of a program other than instinct psychology and if only they did not desert him in the final section of the book—where he turns from psyche to society and is satisfied with his bald reductionist assertions about the central role of instincts in social life—one might indeed have here a durable intellectual model, though regrettably neither of these conditional statements holds true.

Once more, however, Ross falls even shorter from the mark. Whatever penetrating qualities of mind he may have possessed, Ross was careful not to squander them on his *Social Psychology*, which reviewers at the time and later intellectual historians alike rank among his shallower works (e.g., Vincent 1909; Wilson 1968). Where McDougall reasons closely (at least with regard to instincts) and weaves a seamless whole, Ross is casual in the extreme, inserting a vaguely articulated concept here and another there, only to drop them from sight almost as soon as they appear and to introduce others when the mood strikes, unbothered to ponder their relations. “Social psychology” itself he barely defines at the outset of the book and immediately thereafter the expression vanishes entirely, leaving the read-

er to guess the connection between Ross’s conception of the subject and the scattered contents that follow. And scattered they are, for fully a third of Ross’s so-called “Source Book” is given over to long, undigested excerpts (some upward of five pages in length) from sundry other authors—Addams, Baldwin, Bagehot, Cooley, Emerson, Shakespeare, Taine, Twain, Veblen, and more—whose different perspectives and vocabularies Ross makes no effort to reconcile or to integrate into a coherent account. In fact, what conceptual unity the book exhibits is more a result of Ross’s decision to fall back on quotations from his favorite source, “the genius Gabriel Tarde” (vii), at nearly every turn than from any insights that Ross himself brings to the task. As such, his *Social Psychology* hardly qualifies as a classic model of scholarly work and of exemplary standards of intellectual taste and judgment.

There exists, however, a third and more historical criterion by which works from the past sometimes qualify as classics. The two criteria reviewed so far are, in the language of historically oriented scholars (such as myself) who study the development of the social sciences, “presentist”; they evaluate writings from earlier periods according to current-day measures, judging those writings as meritorious to the extent that they either speak to specific issues of contemporary interest or exemplify deeper intellectual qualities that hold continuing value. Historically minded critics, however, fault both of these presentist standards for decontextualizing works from the past—for disembedding such texts from the intellectual debates in which they were situated and, as a result, obscuring the significance they may (or may not) have had with reference to their own times and places (see Jones 1977, 2005). From the point of view of historians of the social sciences, what primarily establishes a text as a classic is its historical achievement: its role, for example, in substantively enriching the discourses and practices of which it was a part or in originating a distinctive intellectual tradition.

Shifting to this yardstick, however, scarcely appears to cast McDougall’s and Ross’s books in a more favorable light. To be

sure, because neither text has yet been the focal subject of detailed intellectual-historical research, only a tentative assessment is possible at this time, though preliminary indicators all point toward the same conclusion, at least in regard to the development of social psychology. This is that neither Ross's *Social Psychology* nor McDougall's *Introduction* played a decisive role in the historical origins of social psychology as an intellectual tradition, discourse, or practice. As recent scholarship on the development of social psychology has begun to demonstrate, going back as far as the closing decades of the nineteenth century, social psychology already consisted in a multi-stranded family of intellectual projects, too diverse to trace its start to any discrete moment of conception, let alone to the comparatively late arrival of two eccentric black sheep. By 1900, according to Morawski's analysis, the rapidly accumulating literature on "social psychology pulsed with possibilities for understanding the social features of psychological experience" (2000:430). Good draws the implication of this situation: "while [the McDougall-Ross] 'origin myth' serves a useful purpose in allowing the reconstruction of a dual-heritage history [of social psychology], it fails to take account of earlier 'social psychological' developments such as the *Volkerpsychologie* of Moritz Lazarus, Hermann Steinthal, and Wilhelm Wundt and the crowd psychology of late-nineteenth century Italian and French writers such as Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon" (2000:391), among numerous other sources (on these sources, see Farr 1996; Jahoda 2007; Rodrigues and Levine 1999; and Burnham 2000, the special issue on the origins of social psychology).

Restricting attention merely to works in English with "social psychology" in the title, the decade prior to 1908 saw the appearance of Baldwin's *Social and Ethical Interpretations: A Study in Social Psychology* (1897), Burris's *The Value of Social Psychology* (1907), and Thomas's *Sex and Society: Studies in the Social Psychology of Sex* (1907), the publication of Ellwood's dissertation *Some Prolegomena to Social Psychology* (1901) and Appleton's thesis *The*

Social Psychology of the School-room (1903), along with numerous entries in the journal literature. Getting beyond titles and looking inside texts, the two decades prior to 1908 brought forth literally hundreds of English-language publications in sociology, psychology, and other social scientific fields, where "social psychology" was heavily in evidence. This is to say nothing of the many American, British, and continental social scientists of the period whose work dealt with social psychological issues using other expressions (see Curti 1980; Greenwood 2004). Not surprisingly, when the International Congress of Psychology met in Paris in the summer of 1900, "social psychology" formed one of the six major sections into which the event was divided (thus putting social psychology on par with physiological, experimental, and philosophical psychology) (Woodworth 1900).

Set in this rich historical context, Ross's and McDougall's texts of 1908 emerge as rivulets inside a wider and more diverse current of thought that had been gathering force years before they entered the stream and, in all likelihood, would have flowed vigorously forward to carry along later generations even without their idiosyncratic interventions. Again, this is particularly true of Ross's *Social Psychology*, which—insofar as it did not simply reprise his previous book, *Social Control* (1901)—was so intellectually derivative of Tarde as to offer contemporaries little that was unavailable elsewhere. In fairness, McDougall's *Introduction* was more original, and its bold claims on behalf of instinctual determination seem to have attracted wide notice over the course of the next two decades, albeit little in the way of actual intellectual disciples. To the contrary, McDougall's instinct psychology seems to have become for the following academic generation the favorite sparing partner, dragged into the ring to take hits from every aspiring social psychologist looking to make a name by landing an easy punch. Heidebreder reports, for example, that while McDougall's *Introduction* exerted a tremendous "influence" on social psychology, this influence had a "special quality" for the reason that McDougall's stance of instincts quickly placed him so far "outside the pale of scientific

respectability [that] he was widely regarded as an anachronism and a menace” and, as such, “became a symbol of what American psychology”—American social psychology, in particular—“most heartily set itself against” (1939:151–2). In no more positive sense, however, does McDougall’s book—or Ross’s—seem to clear the intellectual historian’s threshold for a classic of social psychology (cf. Karpf 1932).

Failing according to presentist and historicist criteria alike, McDougall’s *Introduction* and Ross’s *Social Psychology* may, at this point, seem obliged to relinquish their established places in the intellectual pantheon of social psychology—unless, of course, the main fault here lies not with these two texts but rather with the three standards that purport to justify classic elevation. Yet perhaps this is precisely the problem. What all three criteria have in common is that they seek, from opposite sides, a lofty ideal: a text that significantly addresses the present-day agenda, manifests exemplary intellectual qualities, or marks an important historical transformation. But are these ideal-types sufficient measures of the actual contribution of works from the past? They are not, after all, the standards to which we hold ourselves when evaluating the writings of our contemporaries, for in this situation we tend to be more pragmatic and to esteem works for all sorts of reasons aside from their (very rare) conformity to abstract ideal-types. That pragmatic considerations may enter as well into a discipline’s choice of classic works is a little-appreciated point suggested by Alexander’s astute observation as to how “a classic reduces complexity . . . allowing a very small number of works to substitute for—to represent by a stereotyping or standardizing process—the myriad of finely-graded formulations which are produced in the course of contingent intellectual life” (1989:27–8).

While Alexander himself sees this “extrinsic reason” as subsidiary to the “intrinsic, genuinely intellectual reasons” that warrant a text’s canonization as a classic (1989: 29), Ross’s and McDougall’s books furnish instructive instances—of which there are no doubt others, in and out of social psycholo-

gy—where the extrinsic appears, from early on, to have taken precedence over the intrinsic in the conferral of classic status. If the above historical sketch is roughly correct, the literature of social psychology was already sizeable by 1900, if not by that point too sizeable for a social psychologist to read in its entirety, certainly too cumbersome for him or her to reference and digest within the bounds of the standard journal article of the time. And, before another generation passed, this rapidly expanding literature would become too extensive for a social psychologist even to read and still have time remaining for the other demands of academic life. Faced with this practical predicament, Ross’s and McDougall’s texts—co-appearing just as the social psychological literature was swelling—offered a well-timed solution. By invoking Ross and McDougall, social psychologists could detour around, or tread selectively over, the unwieldy journal literature and still flag that social psychology had historically arrived as a bona fide intellectual pursuit—for here, after all, were substantial books that telegraphed to the world the field’s academic coming of age.

From all appearances, the two 1908 texts assumed this historical condensation function almost immediately. Indeed, within 20 years of their publication, statements like the following, from Ellsworth Faris summarizing the state of social psychology in America, became commonplace (1927:623):

Something of the development of social psychology can be learned from the textbooks, beginning with Baldwin, who brought the social concept to the fore. One goes on to Ross, who brought the torch from France, and passes to McDougall, whose theory of instincts still occupies the center of the stage.²

These two sentences suffice as Faris’s account of the “history” of social psychology, allowing him to proceed directly onward to more contemporary literature and to the task of navigating its

² What Faris writes here about McDougall accords with the assessment of Heidbreder quoted above. As Faris goes on to observe, what put McDougall on the “center” at the time was his “controversial” status and the widespread “reaction” that his work provoked (1927:623–24).

formidable breadth—"the reviewer," as he remarks about himself, "embarrassed by the riches of the material, at least in quantity" (1927:623). Still, Ross and McDougall serve their purpose, for by brandishing their names, along with Baldwin's, and saying very little else about them, Faris effectively abbreviates the already decades-long development of social psychology, communicating in a spare 50 words that social psychology possesses a history and, still further, a multi-threaded history—but now on with the show. Expand this brisk prologue and social psychology's past begins to overwhelm its present; omit the prologue and social psychology is rudely illegitimated, robbed of redoubtable intellectual ancestors. With Ross and McDougall available as historical placeholders, Faris quickly and economically achieves the desired middle course.

Faris's technique here will, of course, look familiar. Already by 1927, his invocation of McDougall and Ross to affirm and condense social psychology's historicity was a formulaic abbreviation, and so it would continue down to the present in hundreds upon hundreds of publications in the field. In this sense, McDougall's *Introduction* and Ross's *Social Psychology* have earned their canonical stripes many times over, emblematically allowing social psychologists to point to their historical roots without having to pause from their research to reflect on them, except perhaps as part of anniversary celebrations like centennials.

Two further points bear notice, however. The first is that this criterion of historical compression, by which McDougall's and Ross's texts have continually proven their value, is neither an exclusively presentist nor an exclusively historicist standard for classical elevation but a little-recognized cross between the two: a standard that looks forward and backward at the same time, valorizing works from the past insofar as they enable historical nonspecialists in the rolling present conveniently to maintain a sense of the historical development of the intellectual enterprise of which they are part. Second, because McDougall's *Introduction to Social Psychology* and Ross's *Social Psychology* warrant classical status by this last criterion

but not by more familiar presentist and historicist criteria, one must beware of confounding these different standards, expecting to find in McDougall's and Ross's texts of 1908 works that address the present-day concerns of social psychology, exhibit timeless qualities of mind, or constitute an intellectual watershed in the history of social psychology, when for a century the contribution of the two books has been of a different, more practical sort.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1989. *Structure and Meaning: Relinking Classical Sociology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Appleton, Lilla Estelle. 1903. *The Social Psychology of the School-room*. MA thesis, Department of Education, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Baldwin, James Mark. 1897. *Social and Ethical Interpretations in Mental Development: A Study in Social Psychology*. London, UK: Macmillan.
- Burnham, John C., ed. 2000. "Re-engaging the History of Social Psychology." Special issue, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 36(4):317–516.
- Burris, William Paxton. 1907. *The Value of Social Psychology*. Cincinnati, OH.
- Curti, Merle. 1980. *Human Nature in American Thought*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Ellwood, Charles. 1901. *Some Prolegomena to Social Psychology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Faris, Ellsworth. 1927. "Social Psychology in America." *American Journal of Sociology* 32:623–30.
- Farr, Robert M. 1996. *The Roots of Modern Social Psychology, 1872–1954*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Good, James M. M. 2000. "Disciplining Social Psychology: A Case Study of Boundary Relations in the History of the Human Sciences." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 36: 383–403.
- Greenwood, John D. 2004. *The Disappearance of the Social in American Social Psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Heidbreder, Edna. 1939. "William McDougall and Social Psychology." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 34: 150–60.
- Jahoda, Gustav. 2007. *A History of Social Psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Robert Alun. 1977. "On Understanding a Sociological Classic." *American Journal of Sociology* 83: 279–319.
- . 2005. *Secret of the Totem: Religion and*

- Society from McLennan to Freud*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Karpp, Fay Berger. 1932. *American Social Psychology: Its Origins, Development, and European Background*. New York: Russell and Russell.
- McDougall, William. 1908. *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. Boston, MA: Luce.
- Merton, Robert K. 1968. "On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory." Pp. 1–38 in *Social Theory and Social Structure* by Robert K. Merton. New York: Free Press.
- . 1971. "Foreword." Pp. vii–viii in *Masters of Sociological Thought* by Lewis A. Coser. New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich.
- Morawski, Jill G. 2000. "Social Psychology a Century Ago." *American Psychologist* 55: 427–30.
- Rodrigues, Aroldo and Robert V. Levine. 1999. *Reflections on 100 Years of Experimental Social Psychology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ross, Edward Alsworth. 1901. *Social Control*. New York: Macmillan.
- . 1908. *Social Psychology: An Outline and Source Book*. New York: Macmillan.
- Thomas, William Isaac. 1907. *Sex and Society: Studies in the Social Psychology of Sex*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vincent, George E. 1909. Review of *Social Psychology: An Outline and Source Book*. *American Journal of Sociology* 14:681–7.
- Wilson, R. Jackson. 1968. *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States 1860–1920*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Woodworth, R. S. 1900. "The Fourth International Congress of Psychology." *Science* 12:605–6.

Charles Camic is John Evans Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. He has written extensively on the history of the social sciences in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Currently, he is completing a book on the early intellectual career of Thorstein Veblen.