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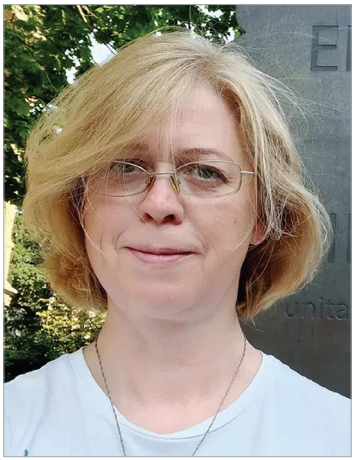

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Biographical note

Daria Drozdova is an Associate Professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, specializing in the history of early modern science and philosophy. Her PhD dissertation explored Alexandre Koyré's conception of the Scientific Revolution. She has participated in editing of collective monographs on Koyré, including "Hypotheses and Perspectives in the History and Philosophy of Science: Homage to Alexandre Koyré 1892-1964" (2018) and "Crossroads of Cultures: A. Koyré, A. Kojève, I. Berlin" (in Russian, 2021). Her current research focuses on the formation of the canon of European philosophy and its reception in Russian philosophical literature of the 19th-20th centuries.

DISCUSSIONS OF THE CANON IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CULTURAL, LITERARY AND DISCIPLINARY CANONS

Daria Drozdova

Abstract

In my paper I examine various conceptions of the canon across different fields of culture and intellectual tradition. I emphasize the importance of distinguishing between cultural or literary canons and disciplinary canons. Within the cultural or literary canon, I further differentiate between canons that relate to the general image of European civilization – such as the so-called Great Books or the canon of great Western literature – and those that pertain to national literary traditions. I contend that much of the criticism that arose during the 'canon wars' of 1980s and 90s was directed specifically at the ideological content of the national literary canon and was extended to other forms of canonicity largely by metonymy. In this regard, it is possible to move away from the critiques and focus more on the positive aspects of the canon as applied to various cultural fields and disciplines. I also argue that, in the case of philosophy, the philosophical canon should be primarily considered as a disciplinary canon, though it also shares certain features with the cultural canon.

Keywords: literary canon; canon of philosophy; Great Books; classics of social science; canon formation; 'canon wars'

A well-known medieval metaphor, cherished and embraced by modernity, says that we are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. Even if we ourselves are nothing remarkable, our ability to use the achievements of our predecessors allows us to see further and deeper than they did. This image seems to imply that the greatness of those who preceded us in culture or in our professional field is something given. Our task is to identify

the tallest giants and comfortably position ourselves on their broad, though now rigid and dead, shoulders. However, in recent decades, we have come to recognize that our view of the past is very selective, and that the recognition of the greatness of our predecessors – or, more precisely, the non-recognition of the greatness of certain others, who might not fulfill our expectations – often depends on various social circumstances, prejudices, the agency of cultural powers, and other such factors. In different areas of culture, as well as in humanities and social sciences, this discussion about our relationship to the greatness of the past has become known as the debates about canon.

The question of the canon has been the subject of active debate for over half a century, with discussions spanning a vast array of cultural and intellectual practices. In different fields, the question of the canon takes on various forms. In literary studies and art history, the discussion concerns the most outstanding works that represent 'masterpieces' or a 'standard of excellence' for cultural production[1]. In cultural studies, museology, and archival science, the canon is regarded as the body of works that merit selection and preservation for posterity – whether these are films, paintings, musical works, computer games and programs, or other cultural artifacts (Glas & van Vught, 2019; Harth, 2008; Lappin, 2022; Staiger, 1985). In the history of science, we may call 'canonical' those examples which are frequently used to illustrate epistemic theses (Bolinska & Martin, 2021).

In my area of interest, the history of early modern philosophy and science, as well as in the broader field of the history of philosophy, the discussion about the canon continues to be a significant topic even today[2]. Conferences, summer schools, and public lectures that explicitly address the problem of the canon in philosophy are held annually[3]. University curricula now include courses dedicated to non-canonical authors. Projects aimed at 'expanding the canon' receive institutional support. For example, the *Project Vox* at Duke University exists from 2015. The curators of the project seeking to give voice and visibility to "philosophical works from marginalized individuals traditionally excluded from the philosophical canon."[4] The *Center for Canon Expansion and Change* was founded at the University of Minnesota three years ago with the aim to transform the teaching and organization of philosophy by supporting instructors in broadening the canon. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada offered financial and institutional support to the *New Narratives in the History of Philosophy* project whose aim is to

develop new narratives of philosophical past and to reconfigure, enrich and reinvigorate the philosophical canon.

Philosophy is not the only discipline concerned with its canon, as we have seen above. When considering discussions about the canon in a broader context, it can be useful to consider the diverse theoretical positions and practical solutions that have been developed in other disciplines as a result of debates on the canon and canonicity over the past 50 years. However, before using the existing conceptual and theoretical richness developed in these disciplines and areas of culture, it makes sense to consider how the approach to the canon in philosophy is similar to, or different from, the approach to the canon in other fields. Should we take the canon to be a list of outstanding philosophical works that possess unique qualities? Or should we consider the canon as the classical and foundational form of philosophy as a discipline? Or should we see the canon as an ideologically charged outcome of the interaction of various social interests?

In order to identify the peculiarity and specificity of the canon in philosophy, it would be appropriate to understand first what the canon represents in other fields. This interest forms the main motivation behind this study. My modest research cannot undertake the ambitious task of fully describing the various approaches to the canon in different areas, so I will limit myself to some of the most significant concepts that will allow me to construct an initial interpretive framework for the canon within which I wish to place the question of canon in philosophy.

In my attempt to find a place for the philosophical canon among the many different types of canons, I will draw on the distinction between the cultural or literary canon and the disciplinary canon. This important distinction was introduced by historians and sociologists (Baehr, 2002; How, 2016; Savelieva & Poletaev, 2010). They indicate that the notion of 'canon' or 'classics' can be interpreted in two ways – either as an object of study, research, veneration, or as part of the corpus of knowledge, the original form of a discipline, a tool for studying and describing the object of study. The first type includes, for example, the literary canon, which is a selected set of works which are worth of consideration due to their intrinsic value, as special and outstanding elements of cultural inheritance. The second type includes the canon of different humanities or social disciplines. Scholars agree that in the case of social sciences (and some humanities), we're not talking about a canon as an object of study, analysis, or even veneration, but about the structural part of the existing

body of knowledge, the texts which are foundational to the discipline. In this sense, the canon or the classics are not the object of study, but rather a tool or lens for studying other objects – specifically, society. Peter Baehr also emphasizes that there is another important distinction between the literary and disciplinary canons, that is the audience to whom they are addressed and who can make judgments about their content. For works of literature, it is not only the professional experts who play an important role, but the reading public as well, which expresses its position through modes of consumption, whereas for the disciplinary canon, the main reception takes place within the circle of professionals (Baehr, 2002, pp. 139–140).

It seems to me that the canon of philosophy has both the features of a disciplinary canon and the features of a cultural or literary canon, though I would like to think that it is closer to the disciplinary canon. On the one hand, the classics of philosophy are studied not only by a narrow circle of professionals, but they are often read by specialists from other fields as well as by general readers. On the other hand, the classics of philosophy are not seen in the philosophical practice itself as something detached from contemporary philosophical discourses, but they remain models and examples of philosophical questioning and conceptual work for new generations of professionals.

To make this comparison between different understandings of canon more explicit, I will now turn to four examples, three of which illustrate the particularities and intrinsic differences in the realm of the cultural or literary canon, while the fourth example refers to the disciplinary canon, that is to the canon or classics of the social sciences. The first three cases were at the center of the 'canon wars' that took place in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. While the canon criticism equally views these canons as a relic of masculine Eurocentricity, the differences between them are worth pointing out and examining. The first is an educational program promoting the reading of the 'Great Books of Western Civilization'. Here, in a certain way, we are talking about a cultural canon, because it is assumed that there is a certain corpus of texts that constitutes the heritage and the highest achievement of Western civilization, and familiarity with this corpus of texts allows readers to become part of a common cultural space. Similarly, in the second case we are also talking about the unified space of Western culture, but the focus is only on works of imaginative literature that constitute the Western literary canon, the representatives of which are supposed to be the greatest poets and artists of past centuries. But a special place in discussions of the canon is occupied by the national literary

canon, in our case, the American Literary Canon whose deconstruction becomes the prototype for all subsequent debates. The national literary canon is the place of condensed narratives where the clash of interests of different cultural agents and the ideological influence of nation-building policies are most prominently manifested. The last case, as mentioned above, considers the canon or classics of social sciences as an example of discussion regarding the disciplinary canon.

I have tried to unite all four cases under the single theme of 'the notion of canon' although in the first case the term 'canon' itself is not initially used from the beginning but it arises only on the account of later criticism. Furthermore, in the case of the social sciences, a separate problem of distinction between the canon and the classics arises. I will turn back to this aspect of the discussion later. For now, I will simply point out that in many cases, both terms are used in discussions, often interchangeably. Researchers may discuss the canon / classics of literature, or the canon / classics of social sciences. In philosophy, the term 'canon' is used more frequently than the term 'classics,' although the latter is also employed (Schliesser, 2017).

In this paper I won't be particularly interested in the criticisms of the canon which often has some common denominators. It is usually said that canons secure the hegemony of a dominant group or reflects ideological assumptions and a colonial worldview, or function as instruments of cultural power, or represent "the insidious privileging of the values of white, Western, middle-class males" (How, 2016, p. 21). While the rejection of the canon almost always is based on the same arguments, the appraisal of canons can be based on different reasons. My interest is mostly in the variety of forms the canon (or the discourse about the canon) can assume. Also, I do not delve into the distant past to elucidate the original meanings of the term 'canon.' Rather, I am interested in more recent uses of the term, primarily from the 1980s and 1990s. And I do not consider the meaning of 'canon' in theological disciplines, assuming that in those fields it has a well-defined and specific usage. My primary focus will be on ideas related to the canon as a cultural entity and educational tool.

1. Improving American education: the 'Great Books' and the literary canons

Since current discussions about the canon in various disciplines are inspired by the 'canon wars' that took place in American culture in the 1980s and 1990s, we will begin our exposition by examining the meanings attributed to the concept of 'canon' in those debates. It should be noted that the debates affected several similar but still different areas of American education. On the one hand, the criticism was directed at the practice of teaching based on the 'Great Books' canon. The expression 'Great Books' referred to key texts of Western civilization, from ancient classics to modern political texts. On the other hand, the focus was on texts related to the literary canon, primarily national American literature.

Although the general criticism directed at these two canons was largely similar, I see a certain difference between the two lines of discussion. The 'Great Books' canon includes literary or philosophical classics, but it is not limited to them. Its focus is not on aesthetic value or philosophical significance but on (1) the expression of values associated with Western civilization and culture, (2) the continuity of cultural tradition, and (3) the richness of content, the familiarity with which it brings the reader closer to an ideal of humanity. Its core idea is the image of the 'educated person,' who is expected to be familiar with a certain textual heritage of Western civilization to consider themselves a part of it. Therefore, the 'Great Books' canon is more oriented towards the past and aims to preserve tradition and continuity within the broad cultural framework known as the 'Western civilization.' Familiarity with this tradition can be described using the metaphor of a 'walk through a portrait gallery of ancestors.' However, for a heterogeneous society like America, these 'ancestors' were not given but were consciously chosen as such.

In contrast, the national literary canon is more related to the recent past and present. National literature does not necessarily have to be rooted in ancient history; on the contrary, older texts are less relevant for the modern reader. Except for certain 'pillars' of national literature (such as Shakespeare or Chaucer for English literature), the literary canon is usually formed from texts of the last two centuries. It is constantly supplemented with new texts that have gained recognition in recent times. This makes the question of the criteria for canon formation more significant and the role of contemporary actors more substantial.

It is important to note that both canons, which came under attack in the 1980s and 1990s, had not existed for centuries. In fact, they both were the result of reforms in the American education system that took place in the 1920s. It was during this time that the first courses aimed at familiarizing students with the 'Great Books' tradition of Western civilization emerged at Columbia University. At the same time special courses on American literature began to appear in university curricula, leading to an institutional selection of texts deemed most representative of the national tradition.

Between these two different educational practices, I will introduce another one that is related to the image of Western civilization and appeals to the aesthetic values inherent in the literary canon. This concerns the canon of great books of Western literature, defended by many literary critics, notably Harold Bloom. As we will see below, in this particular case, the connection of the canon with the immediate needs of the current historical moment comes to the forefront to a much lesser extent. The canon of masterpieces of world literature seems to exist in itself, reproducing itself not through readers but through the addition of new participants to the literary process. This elitism and separateness are striking, and therefore, it deserves to be mentioned as a peculiar tradition.

1.1. The Great Book tradition and Western civilization

The modern Great Books curriculum originated at Columbia College in 1919[5]. John Erskine, a professor of English at the College, introduced a two-year optional General Honors course for a select group of top students in their final two undergraduate years. This course focused on the reading and discussion of what was then referred to as the 'Great Books.' Students were expected to read one book per week and then engage in a two-hour class discussion. The books were read in translation, without the support of existing secondary literature. The goal was to provide students with a direct, first-time experience with the texts. Erskine emphasized that "there was a profound difference between a humane familiarity with great authors and an academic exploration of them" (cit. *apud*. Cross, 1995).

Almost immediately, young assistants joined the teaching of the 'Great Books' course, among them Mortimer Adler and Mark Van Doren. Adler quickly became instrumental in popularizing the educational approach through reading significant books. By the late 1920s, Adler moved to the University of Chicago, where he found a like-minded ally in the then-president, Robert Maynard Hutchins. Together, they launched joint

marketing efforts that helped spread the practice of reading 'Great Books' based on Erskine's model, making it popular not only in colleges but also for adult education. Initially offered exclusively to the most distinguished students capable of reading one dense and challenging book per week, these courses later gained popularity as an educational tool for a broader audience. Adler's influential text *How to Read a Book*, published in 1940, quickly became a bestseller[6]. In it, he argued for the significance of 'Great Books' for general culture and education and provided practical guidance for better understanding the content of the texts being read.

The content of these courses was never fixed, yet it was not extremely diverse either. It seems that in the minds of Erskine, Adler, and other participants in this project, there was a fairly extensive list of texts they considered classic and significant for contemporary educated persons. From this extensive list, they formed a narrower selection of texts they were ready to discuss with students. These lists of books offered to students for reading were usually approved by faculty councils and administration. Therefore, they cannot be considered the creation of a few educators but rather the result of collective agreement. Commentators point out that Erskine himself did not aim to create a canon. Katherine Ellis Chaddock, Erskine's biographer, notes that "he had his own favorites, but there is no indication that he was ever attached to a precise canon," and his initial proposal "eliminated both the authority of scholars sharing the conclusions of their specialized literary investigations and the authority of a chosen canon of must-read works" (Chaddock, 2012, p. 89). However, Chaddock named the chapter discussing Erskine's 'Great Books' initiative *A Canon for the Rest of Us*, clearly implying that a canon was eventually established after all.

Chaddock meticulously reconstructs the process of creating Erskine's course. The first attempt to offer such a course to the faculty dates back to 1916. At that time, Erskine proposed 133 works divided into three lists—literature, history, and philosophy—but members of the Committee of Instruction reduced the list to 80 texts. When the course was first implemented in 1919, the final list included works by 51 authors, and it was constantly revised throughout the course (Chaddock, 2012, p. 92). The following names can be found in Erskine's papers as part of the original proposal:

> Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, Plutarch, Marcus

> Aurelius, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Galileo, Grotius, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Milton, Molière, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Gibbon, Smith, Kant, Goethe, American State Papers, Hugo, Hegel, Lyell, Balzac, Malthus, Bentham, Mill, Darwin, Pasteur, Marx, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gardner, Nietzsche, and James ("Outline of Readings in Important Books," 1926 typescript cit. by Chaddock, 2012, p. 209).

But it wasn't the stable and final canon, the list was subject to continuous revision. For instance, during the course, a student suggested that a work of contemporary philosopher George Santayana should be included, and Erskine agreed with that (*ibid*).

While the list of books used in Erskine's course was constantly reviewed and adjusted, the changes were not radical. According to Mortimer Adler, a few years after the course began, an attempt was made to reach a consensus on which books should be offered to students. Adler, who was one of the course instructors and the faculty secretary at the time, compiled all the suggestions into a list of about 300 titles. Colleagues then voted on which books to exclude from the list. After several rounds of voting, about 80 texts remained that had achieved consensus. Most of these books were already on Erskine's list. It was an important experience for Adler: "From those two years of revision, I learned the extent to which there is unanimity of judgment about the great books. It became clear that it would be difficult to make a list much longer than a hundred authors about whom such universal agreement could be obtained" (Adler, 1966, p. 327).

Subsequently, Adler became convinced that the list of 'Great Books' was not a subjective construct of any individual, but rather a reflection of an established tradition over centuries, preserving the most outstanding examples of human (read: 'European') intellectual culture: "It is to be expected, of course, that their selection of 'best books' will change with the times. Yet there is a surprising uniformity in the lists that represent the best choices of any period. […] The changes which each later age makes are mainly additions rather than substitutions. Naturally, the list of great books grows in the course of time, but its roots and outlines remain the same" (Adler, 1966, p. 325).

When Mortimer Adler took up the project at the University of Chicago, he elevated it to a new level, transforming the college course into a comprehensive educational program. By 1952, Hutchins and

Adler prepared the publication of the *Great Books of the Western World* series for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, consisting of 54 volumes. This series included texts by numerous ancient authors, early modern scientists and philosophers, literary works, political manifestos and declarations. It was concluded with the works of William James and Freud. Based on the texts included in this multi-volume series, Adler created a recommended reading list, which was incorporated into later editions of his book. In 1966, he divided the recommended texts into four sections (Adler, 1966, pp. 374–378):

> Imaginative literature: Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Virgil, Dante, *Chaucer, Rabelais*, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, *Swift, Fielding, Sterne*, Goethe, *Melville*, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky[7]
>
> History and Social Sciences: Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, *Tacitus, Machiavelli*, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Smith, Gibbon, The Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, The Constitution of the United States of America, *Boswell, The Federalist*, Mill, Marx (The Capital), *Marx and Engels* (The Manifesto)
>
> Natural Sciences and Mathematics: *Hippocrates, Euclid, Archimedes, Apollonius of Perga, Nicomachus, Galen, Ptolemy, Copernic, Gilbert*, Galileo, *Kepler, Harvey, Huygens, Newton, Lavoisier, Fourier, Faraday*, Darwin, James, *Freud*
>
> Philosophy and Theology: Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, *Epictetus*, Marcus Aurelius, *Plotinus*, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Bacon, Descartes, *Pascal, Spinoza*, Locke, *Berkeley, Hume*, Kant, Hegel

A comparison of the two lists presented above shows that, despite minor variations, they largely coincide with each other. This is not surprising, considering that Adler began his work as Erskine's assistant, and Erskine served as a consultant in the creation of the *Great Books of the Western World* series. A notable difference is that Adler included several key authors and works from the history of natural sciences and mathematics whom Erskine did not mention. In Erskine's original project, the history of science was considered through key ideas rather than key texts, but this part was not implemented in his course (Chaddock, 2012, p. 89). Besides the matching names, the logic behind these lists is also similar: a large

portion of ancient classics, followed by a series of well-known writers, philosophers, political theorists, and scientists from the early modern period till the 19th century, and practically no one from the 20th century.

If we consider the goals Erskine set by introducing the reading of Great Books into college education, creating a canon was not his primary objective. He was concerned that students had few points of intersection outside the classroom, so he aimed to recreate the spirit of an intellectual community. For him, the joint reading and discussion of books was not only a tool to develop the student into a more complete human being but also an instrument for fostering a sense of community among students. Adler pointed out to a political dimension to this intention: "In such a community, Erskine said, democracy would be safe, for democracy requires intelligent communication about and common participation in the solution of human problems" (Adler, 1966, p. 357).

Adler later emphasized even more the importance of engaging with classical texts for cultivating not only an educated human being but also a citizen: "even reading the great books well is not an end in itself. It is a means toward living a decent human life, the life of a free man and a free citizen … Only a trained intelligence can think freely. And where there is no freedom in thinking, there can be no freedom of thought. Without free minds, we cannot long remain free men" (Adler, 1966, p. 354).

Similarly, Hutchins, in an introductory article to the *Great Books of the Western World* series, insisted that the knowledge of ideas expressed in Great Books helps to preserve democratic society and values:

> "Democracy will fall a prey to the loudest and most persistent propagandists unless the people save themselves from this fate by so strengthening their minds that they can appraise the issues for themselves. […] we believe that these books are a help to that grasp of history, politics, morals and economics, and to that habit of mind necessary to form valid judgments" (Hutchins, 1952, p. xiii).

What motivated the authors of the project to select particular texts included initially in the course and then in the published series? Firstly, they believed these were genuinely outstanding works. This was evidenced by their enduring presence over the centuries. As Adler noted, it is essentially the same list that only grows over time (Adler, 1966, p. 325). Secondly, these texts, especially the philosophical and literary ones, addressed questions that Erskine, Adler, and Hutchins considered the

most important and fundamental, never losing their relevance. Therefore, reading these texts was not an archival curiosity but an introduction to the eternal problems of humanity. Thirdly, these texts existed within a unified communicative space, expressing different positions on the same set of issues. This allowed to call them 'the Great Conversation.' This final characteristic – the internal dialogue among these texts – enabled them to somewhat counter the accusation that the Great Books canon was limited to Western civilization. Hutchins pointed out that Great Books of the Eastern world could exist as well, but the project's authors were interested only in texts that belonged to a unified intellectual space and, by doing so, constituted the essence of Western civilization (Hutchins, 1952, p. xx). Yes, it was the canon, and it was the Western canon. According to Hutchins, "it would be an exaggeration to say that Western civilization means these books. The exaggeration would lie in the omission of the plastic arts and music, which have quite as important a part in Western civilization as the great productions included in this set. But to the extent to which books can present the idea of a civilization, the idea of Western civilization is here presented" (Hutchins, 1952, p. 2).

Of course, criticism of this approach was not long to come. Critics pointed out that the Great Books canon does not include any works written by women, contains very few texts from the 20th century, and is explicitly limited to the Western world, while it claims to address the fundamental problems and questions that concern humanity as a whole. Additionally, the project's creators deliberately separated the reading of the Great Books from their academic study, encouraging readers to see classical authors as their contemporaries. This undoubtedly led to rather specific and even amateurish interpretations of the texts. Allan Bloom, who became famous for his lament over the decline of academic culture in America, also pointed out that many of the criticisms leveled against "the good old Great Books approach" were valid: "it encourages an autodidact's self-assurance without competence; … the whole movement has a certain coarse evangelistic tone that is the opposite of good taste; it engenders a spurious intimacy with greatness; and so forth" (A. Bloom, 1988, p. 344). At the same time, he saw a certain redemptive mission in the turn towards the Great Books: it was "the only serious solution [of the problems of modern American education] … that is almost universally rejected" (*ibid*). According to Bloom, reading the Great Books offers significant benefits to contemporary students. It fosters an awareness of the classics and familiarity with the major questions that once dominated

intellectual discourse. Additionally, it provides models for addressing these questions and, most importantly, creates a foundation of shared experiences and thoughts that can strengthen their friendships.

Nevertheless, the weakness of the 'Great Books' project seems to lie not only in the fact that books were taken out of context, stripped of their historical dimension, and presented as 'contemporaries' to the unprepared reader. There is a certain arbitrariness in the selection of these books. The authors intended to create a common space for intellectual interaction among students and to familiarize them with the tradition of Western civilization. However, this tradition primarily existed in the minds of the university professors who were engaged in this project. What seems significant, though, is that they understood the Great Books not as isolated units but as part of a broader historical exchange of ideas and images, which represented for them the concept of Western civilization. They viewed the dynamics of the formation of the Great Books as the inclusion of new participants in an already existing conversation. This image of a shared space for dialogue among elements of tradition seems important for the subsequent development of the idea of the canon.

1.2. The 'Western Canon' of Harold Bloom

The creators of the Great Books project did not use the term 'canon' – they spoke of Great Books or the Great Conversation. The term 'canon' came then from the area of literary criticism, but it signified the very same idea promoted by Erskine and his colleagues – that there is a certain set of texts which stand out among the rest and which an educated person should know.

In the second section of my paper, I will focus on a particular conception of the Western canon as presented in the eponymous book by the renowned American literary critic Harold Bloom. Bloom's intervention in the discussion occurred in the mid-1990s, a time when the main part of the arguments against literary and cultural canons had already been formulated. Thus, Harold Bloom was primarily reacting to the educational and cultural transformations that had occurred in the preceding decades. In 1994, Bloom published a book entitled *The Western Canon: Books and Schools of the Ages*. The book received widespread acclaim and was translated into many languages, including Russian, Romanian, Chinese, and others, and continues to attract interest to this day.

Harold Bloom's book is indeed a manifesto of an elitist view of the literary canon where he attempts to defend the canon from criticism and from the influence of popular social and political movements. Bloom's 'Western Canon' in some respects harks back to the previous concept of the 'Great Books of the Western World,' but the difference is that Bloom's canon primarily dealt with artistic and literary works, whereas the Great Books included texts from various intellectual domains. Nonetheless, both concepts referred to the intellectual heritage of a generalized 'Western civilization.' This implies, on the one hand, that such a historical cultural (or civilizational) entity can be identified, and, on the other hand, that the readers of the canonical texts are willing to perceive themselves as heirs to this cultural unity.

However, in many aspects, Bloom's concept of the literary canon diverges significantly from the previously described educational project of the 'Great Books.' While the Great Books project aimed to reach a broad audience, intending to spread the tradition of reading great works to as many young people as possible within a liberal education framework, Bloom emphasizes that the appreciation of literary works and their associated aesthetic values is likely accessible to only a select few. He insists that in the field of literary criticism "we need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers. The others, who are amenable to a politicized curriculum, can be abandoned to it" (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 17). The literary criticism is therefore an elitist phenomenon and it does not pretend to satisfy a general public. In a very poetic way Bloom dreams of a contemporary academic *vita contemplativa*: "When our English and other literature departments shrink to the dimensions of our current Classics departments, ceding their grosser functions to the legions of Cultural Studies, we will perhaps be able to return to the study of the inescapable, to Shakespeare and his few peers, who after all, invented all of us."

The creators of the Great Books project believed that reading the selected works would help young people become better individuals and citizens, actively involved in the building of a democratic society. In contrast, Harold Bloom asserts that great literature does not make readers better people or citizens, and neither does reading the great works of Western literature help to create a democratic community or foster communication among people. On the contrary, encountering a literary work is a solitary experience, allowing individuals to connect with their inner selves, enlarge a solitary existence, and confront their mortality

(H. Bloom, 1994, pp. 29–30). "I think that the self [continues Bloom] in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with one aim only: to confront greatness. That confrontation scarcely masks the desire to join greatness, which is the basis of the aesthetic experience once called the Sublime" (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 524).

A key aspect of the literary canon, according to Bloom, is that it is built around the notion of aesthetic value. The canon is founded upon artistic, that is, aesthetic, criteria (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 22). Aesthetic value is a distinctive inherent characteristic of artistic objects, differing from ideological interests or class struggles. It is perceived by the reader through aesthetic experience and appreciation, though not every reader is capable of understanding or recognizing it. Aesthetic experience pertains to the highest human faculties, involving a special pleasure that is neither easy nor easily attainable. This experience can be painful and demands effort and dedication. The primary acknowledgment of aesthetic value occurs within the circle of those involved in its production. Aesthetic value constitutes itself through the process of inter-artistic influence. "Such influence contains psychological, spiritual, and social components, but its major element is aesthetic" (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 24). According to Bloom, every creator, poet, or writer, is part of a chain of overcoming influence. Each outstanding author grows from the 'anxiety of influence,' recognizing the greatness of their predecessors while simultaneously striving to assert their originality against this backdrop.

While Adler believed that the list of the most significant books of Western civilization could be limited to around one hundred titles, Bloom did not consider that it would be possible to create such a list because an ideal corpus of canonical works may contain more than 3,000 titles: "It is not, cannot be, precisely the list I give, or that anyone else might give. If it were, that would make such a list a mere fetish, just another commodity" (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 37). However, in practice, he does not strictly adhere to this principle. Firstly, he readily reduces the Western canon to the body of works by a single author—William Shakespeare. Shakespeare stands out among the masters of world literature for his aesthetic supremacy and unique eminence. Bloom acknowledges Shakespeare as the center of the Western canon, and not only the Western one; if there were a global literary canon, Shakespeare would be at its center as well (H. Bloom, 1994, pp. 62–63). Shakespeare impresses Bloom with his originality, dynamism, diversity of characters, and accessibility to various interpretations. The rest of the canon can be seen as revolving around Shakespeare: it includes

works that prepared for and preceded Shakespeare, positioning themselves in relation to him. Those who come after him live in his shadow—they imitate, overcome, or deny Shakespeare.

In his book Bloom ultimately presents us 26 authors, each of whom, while significant in their own right, is to some extent connected to Shakespeare. Their works either influenced or were influenced by Shakespeare, creating a continuum of literary excellence. The list includes, beside Shakespeare, the following names:

> Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, literary critic Samuel Johnson, Moliere, John Milton, Goethe, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Walt Whitman (the center of American canon), Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, Henrik Ibsen, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Fernando Pessoa, Samuel Beckett.

Bloom's selection underscores his view of Shakespeare as the central figure of the Western literary tradition, whose impact and legacy permeate the canon. The 26 authors represent a range of periods and styles, illustrating the dynamic interplay of influence and innovation that characterizes the development of Western literature. By positioning these authors in relation to Shakespeare, Bloom emphasizes the ongoing dialogue within the canon, where each work is both a product of its time and a participant in a larger, evolving conversation. These authors and their works are seen not only as masterpieces but also as integral parts of a tradition that both informs and is informed by Shakespeare's unparalleled contributions. This perspective reinforces Bloom's argument that the Western Canon, while vast and varied, revolves around the aesthetic and intellectual paradigms established by Shakespeare, thus shaping the literary landscape for generations to come.

Having selected 26 authors from a vast body of literature, Bloom asks then what constitutes their greatness and what allows them to be canonical. Bloom finds that we can identify the peculiarity of canonical texts in their 'strangeness.' This strangeness can manifest itself as either something very familiar and close (in the case of Shakespeare) or as something unsettling in its unfamiliarity that we cannot assimilate (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 3). Shakespeare again reveals to be outstanding: "His powers of assimilation and of contamination are unique. Shakespearean drama seems at once utterly familiar and yet too rich to absorb all at once". Thus, for Bloom,

the strangeness of a work – its unique and idiosyncratic quality – plays a crucial role in its canonical status. This strangeness either remains perpetually enigmatic or becomes so integrated into our perception that we no longer recognize its peculiarities.

The authors presented in Bloom's book do not exhaust what can be called the Western Canon. In an appendix, Bloom attempts to provide a more comprehensive list of works, which he proposes as a provisional 'reading list.' This list is divided into three periods. The first period is termed the 'Theocratic Age' and encompasses ancient culture and the Middle Ages. Bloom includes a selection of works from the Middle East and India due to their influence on the Western Canon: *Gilgamesh*, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and *The Holy Bible*, as well as *The Mahabharata*, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, and *The Ramayana*. He further mentions 47 authors and over 90 works from the Classic Greek and Roman period and from the Arab and European Middle Ages, ranging from Homer and Plato to *Beowulf* and *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*. The second period, titled the 'Aristocratic Age,' spans from the Renaissance to the early 19th century. It includes 143 authors, categorized by nationality, from Dante to Friedrich Schiller. The third period, the 'Democratic Age,' begins in the post-Goethean 19th century. The list comprises around 159 authors, with American literature significantly represented. Bloom however notes that he refrained from including "a number of sadly inadequate women writers of the nineteenth century" (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 540).

The book concludes with a list of more than 500 names from the 20th century, whose place in the canon may not yet be secure. Bloom refers to this list as 'A Canonical Prophecy.' This list is notably comprehensive and includes not only American and European authors but also writers from India, Africa, the Arab world, and Jewish culture. According to Bloom, each of these authors stands out not for their relevance to the present moment but for their literary qualities and ability to continue the eternal aesthetic conversation.

In the conception of the canon presented by Bloom, it is striking that the responsibility for identifying and presenting the canon primarily belongs to a narrow circle of experts, literary critics. These critics are the ones capable of discerning and recognizing the aesthetic excellence that constitutes the canonicity of a literary work. To some extent, even the reading public does not participate in forming the canon, as they may be captivated by ephemeral trends. At the end of his book, Bloom speaks of the image of the 'competent reader,' to whom his recommended reading

lists are addressed. This competent reader is presumed to be as interested in reading as the literary critic, and capable of following the critic in the pursuit of complex and intriguing aesthetic pleasure.

At the same time, Bloom emphasizes that the canon is not even created by critics, but by the creators themselves. He states that the canon is essentially a dialogue between authors of different eras: "Writers, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridging between strong precursors and strong successors" (H. Bloom, 1994, p. 522). Thus, the canon of great literature is something that exists in and of itself. It emerges through the process of literary creation, and literary critics, along with competent readers, can only recognize it. They cannot even influence its expansion or alteration.

1.3. The American literary canon

In the example given above, the canon essentially did not belong to any specific community except the community of poets, writers, and literary critics. The Western canon, as described by Harold Bloom, is related to American culture only to the extent to which American readers, like any others, have the ability to recognize the aesthetic perfection of a literary work. The Great Books of the Western civilization were not strictly American either. The creators of the project saw the United States as the culmination and highest form of the Western civilization's development, although they believed that the foundations of this civilization were laid in Ancient Greece, Rome, and Modern Europe. They were not at all concerned that most of the texts they referenced were written in other languages and contexts. These texts were considered to be the roots nourishing the modern liberal and democratic society of the United States.

A completely different issue arises when we talk about a national literary canon. It can be noted that a national literary canon is more ideologically charged than other canons, as national literature directly relates to the nation's image and its perception of itself and its great achievements. It is not only the greatness of individual representatives of national culture that is of interest here. National literature is an artistic expression of society's view of itself, its values and norms, its past and its future[8]. Thus, a large number of powers and agents are involved in the process of canon formation.

In the case of the literary canon, the expectations of the present-day readers come first. The modern readers, including students seek texts that

speak to them about their own experiences and in their own language. National literature fulfills this requirement best. It shapes national identity, gives meaning to past events, and sets standards and norms of behavior for the present (Šeina, 2021). In the case of American literature, yet another factor encouraged an appeal to the national tradition. American students and educators were keen to highlight and hear the unique voices of American writers and poets in order to end the perception of American literature as "an inferior and parvenu branch of British letters" (Lauter, 1991, p. 16).

In this section, our guide will be the writer and 'radical teacher' Paul Lauter, author of the book *Canons and Contexts* (1991), who played a central role in the processes of transforming the teaching of American literature in colleges. He was the creator of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* and an active contributor to the journal *Radical Teacher*. Lauter's ideas about expanding the American literary canon to include texts that equally reflect the diverse life and social experiences of people from different backgrounds in American society have been well received in educational practices.

As in the first case, the story began in the 1920s when courses on American literature were introduced in universities. This quickly led to the necessity of moving from general recommended reading lists to lists of literature that became a matter of national pride. Paul Lauter notes that during this process, women and writers of color were gradually pushed out of the existing anthologies and reading lists (Lauter, 1991, pp. 24–37). Most university professors were "college-educated white men of Anglo-Saxon or northern European origins", and they considered literature written – and read – by women or African Americans unworthy of academic attention. Lauter illustrates, using the example of changes in the content of American literature anthologies published in the first half of the 20th century, how some popular works gradually disappeared from these collections, so that "by the end of the 1950s, one could study American literature and read no work by a black writer, few works by women except Dickinson and perhaps Marianne Moore or Katherine Anne Porter, and no work about the lives or experiences of working-class people" (Lauter, 1991, p. 27).

When national literature became a subject of teaching, it also became subject to greater control by teachers and university administrators who belonged to certain social groups. They determined what should be considered more significant or more representative in the national literary tradition. Paul Lauter provides an example of how this worked, noting that

"a significant portion of canonical literature presents men pushing toward frontiers, exploring, conquering, exploiting the resources of sea and land" (Lauter, 1991, pp. 102–103). These works represented the masculine world of the hunter, the scout, the explorer, and the man living on the frontier. This is strictly related to the image of America as a country of continuous colonization, where the man – the warrior, the hunter, the explorer – is the main driving force of society. However, this focus marginalized all other ways and forms of life in this society – the lives of African slaves, of migrants, the everyday life of women, and the lives of those who were marginalized in this world of militant men. This posed a challenge for people like Paul Lauter – to find a way to reintroduce into literature the themes that had been marginalized by the 1950s canon.

In the 1960s and 70s, access to university education expanded and the student body became a heterogeneous mix of people from different social groups and classes. The political and social movements of the late 1960s challenged the academic system, demanding greater inclusion and attention to women and minorities. As a result of the changing social structure of the student body and the social movements of the 1960s, there was a reconsideration of what national literature should represent as a subject of study and teaching. The first serious discussions began in the early 1970s, when the need to revise the content of American literary education emerged. However, the actual changes occurred quite slowly. In the 1980s the range of literature offered for study expanded and the structures of anthologies changed to give more attention to women's literature and literature written by African Americans, but significant changes in education still were yet not observed. Lauter conducted a detailed analysis of the university curricula of that period. There was much more variability in these courses compared to the Great Books educational practice. However, a thorough examination of the courses content revealed that very few women's names were mentioned even in the 1980s.

It may seem that the process of expanding the canon encounters the factor of aesthetic value, which cannot be excluded from the evaluation of a literary work. A text that is included in the pantheon of the national canon must first and foremost demonstrate outstanding aesthetic and artistic qualities that allow it to earn recognition from readers. The fact that a text meets contemporary needs and demands does not exempt it from the requirement of being a high-quality and even exceptional literary work. Lauter, however, points out that aesthetic value alone is not sufficient to grant a work special status (Lauter, 1991, pp. 104–105). Our aesthetic

tastes are contingent and subject to change (Herrnstein Smith, 1991). And most importantly, the aesthetic quality of a work is also determined by the emotional response it can evoke in the reader (Lauter, 1991, p. 105). If old masculine values are no longer in demand in society, then works that celebrate these values are held in less esteem.

The national literary canon follows increasingly the logic of representativeness rather than the logic of aesthetic value. John Guillory called this approach to the canon formation "imaginary politics of representation" because the literary canon is supposed to be a true image of social diversity and "the [literary] work is perceived to be immediately expressive of the author's experience as a representative member of some social group" (Guillory, 1993, p. 3-10). The cultural movement that led to the revision of the canon within national literature blamed the previous canon as something authoritarian, imposed by a narrow group of people with social, political, and cultural power. The canon, largely formed during the establishment of literary education in universities from the 1920s to the 1950s, was seen as promoting a very male-centered, Eurocentric colonial set of values and perspectives on the nation's history. At the same time, critics of the canon often proposed not to abolish it but to expand or alter it, thereby creating a new canon that simply included different works while excluding others. The idea was that the canon should reflect the social diversity of the American nation and allow any reader to find something resonant with their own life experiences in the literary works offered for reading.

Under the influence of Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, and other theoretical movements, there was not only a practical expansion of the list of texts considered worthy of attention in the national literary tradition but also a rethinking of the principles behind the formation of the national literary canon. First of all, the national literature is seen as an important instrument highly adapted to communicate values, shape consciousness, and even influence the behavior of a nation because it encodes a set of social norms and values specific to that society. Another crucial aspect of the literature is its contribution in creation of a 'usable past,' which involves a shared evaluation of historical events. Moreover, literature has the unique ability to represent the diverse experiences of people from different social groups. For instance, when we discuss the importance of women's literature, we not only acknowledge women as authors but also emphasize the specific problems and experiences depicted in their works as distinctly female.

Not surprisingly, the selection of literary texts offered to students turns out to be a process in which a wide variety of powers and actors clash and conflict. These are the attitudes of teachers themselves, the vital interests of students, the commercial and promotional interests of publishing houses, the ideas and ideals of influential literary critics, and the political and ideological interests of those who desire to influence the public image of the past or the images of the future. It is quite logical that such a diverse space of acting forces was proposed to be described in Bourdieu's terms as a field of institutional forces influencing the distribution of cultural capital (Guillory, 1993). It seems, however, that the understanding of the canon as an ideological product that reflects the established social order and must therefore be overcome or rejected is specific to discussions of national literature in the first place. Not surprisingly, the proposal to consider Shakespeare as a product of the class interests of early bourgeois society elicited only perplexity and rejection in such critics as Harold Bloom.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight another aspect of the national literary canon: the processes of its formation. When it comes to the national literary canon, the ideological influence and the impact of social and cultural power and authority become significant. Harold Bloom's literary canon was initially defined through mutual recognition among artists and then through the literary critic's ability to discern and appreciate aesthetic value. In contrast, the formation of the national literary canon is also significantly influenced by the public, schools and universities, national literary awards, and publishing policies. The national literary canon does not only exist in the past; it is continuously created in the present through the recognition and preservation of new literary works emerging in the contemporary cultural space. Thus, the question of the national literary canon is not only about the past and its representation but also about the current selection of works worthy of preservation for the future. In this context, the issues of cultural capital and cultural influence become crucially important. At the same time, no decision by individual experts or cultural policies can bestow popularity and significance on a literary work that does not gain recognition from the broader public, as it must respond to the interests and demands of readers here and now.

2. The Classics/Canon of the Social Sciences

In the second part of this paper, I turn to a different type of reflection on the canon, one that is tied to the formation of disciplinary identity. Here, our focus will be on the disciplinary canon. Inevitably, the question arises as to whether the term 'canon' is properly used in this context, given that the traditional term 'classics' already exists. There are grounds to believe that in the case of the disciplinary canon, there is a metaphorical transfer of meaning – not from the religious significance of the canon, as some authors suggest, but from the cultural and literary understanding of the term. Yet, even in this case, we are dealing with the relationship between the past and the present. The formation of the image of the past involves highlighting certain authors, texts, and ideas that are deemed worthy of preservation in the historical memory of a particular group. This heritage shapes the identity of this group and establishes sets of norms and rules that community members can follow.

In sociology, the use of the term 'canon' to describe the foundational texts of the discipline was not typical until the 1990s. Alan How recalls that in the 1970s, when he was a student, no one spoke of a canon or distinguished between canonical and non-canonical authors, even though Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were already recognized authorities and were placed above Simmel, Mead, or Tönnies (How, 2016, p. 241). When the term 'canon' began to be applied to the sociological classics, it already carried a negative connotation inherited from the struggle against the ideologically charged literary canon. Critics used the term to highlight the exclusivity, authoritativeness, imperialism, and narrowness of the disciplinary canons where the priority was given to a few white European men from the upper middle class. Nevertheless, the term took hold, and the concept of canon found both opponents and defenders.

It may seem that in the disciplinary field of humanities and social sciences the concept of 'canon' complements the concept of 'classics': 'canon' describes the community or collection of authors and texts that individually are called 'classics' (Weinsheimer, 1991, p. 130). Yet, Peter Baehr in his influential book *Founders, Classics, Canons* (1 ed. 1994, 2 ed 2002) criticized the application of the term 'canon' to the classics of sociology. He pointed out that the term has overly explicit religious connotations, making its metaphorical application to secular classics misleading: "the term 'canon' has little sociological value as applied to secular classic texts […] and erroneously implies that secular classics and

religious canons have fundamentally similar properties" (Baehr, 2002, p. 149). The term 'canon' in its religious meaning describes a fixed, ordered set of sacred texts fundamental to religious doctrine. The classical texts of social sciences lack analogous properties: unlike religious canonical texts, "classical texts are emergent, not the product of calculation; they are not existing as an integrated whole; they are open and fluid, not closed or fixed; and as amenable to discussion and criticism as other secular texts are" (Baehr, 2002, p. 166). This view is also supported by Russian historians Irina Savelieva and Andrey Poletaev, who state that "the use of the term 'canon' in relation to scientific classics seems incorrect to us, even at the level of metaphor, not to mention the concept, which has a stable religious meaning" (Savelieva & Poletaev, 2010, p. 26).

I think one could object here by emphasizing that the terms 'canon' and 'canonical' have no theological origin at all; it seems instead that their usage in the religious contexts may be metaphorical as well (cfr. Gorak, 1991, p. 20-23). In the current debates on the literary canons no one assumes that the canons are fixed, eternally established or immune to criticism. Therefore, there is no reason to consider the employment of the term 'canon' in sociology as inappropriate. Alan How also argues that the secular canon does not exhibit the rigidity that researchers see in the religious canon. However, he believes that distinguishing between canon and classics is useful in sociology, as this distinction reflects the difference between structure (canon) and agency (classics). He insists that "while classics and canons in many actual everyday situations appear fused together, as with agency and structure, they are not synonymous terms, but are analytically separable, speak of different things, and are explainable in different ways" (How, 2016, p. 233). The canonicity of the canon and the classicality of the classics are therefore different properties, and one can conceive of a classic that is not part of the canon or a canonical text that is not considered classic.

According to How, works in a canon represent what a discipline believes about itself. This canon is formed to meet the needs of the discipline to define itself at a particular time by building its identity. In contrast, the nature of a classic lies in its 'classicality,' a property that relates to the Gadamerian horizons of historical tradition. This classicality is acquired through the text's ability to reveal the connections between the past and the present, thereby illuminating the significance of both. A classic is productive of new insights because it can, through tradition, shed light on important aspects of subsequent historical contexts. Texts in

the canon are simply passed down to subsequent generations as elements that structure the disciplinary field. To be a classic text, a work must continually affirm its ability for agency in the present.

While I find it meaningful to distinguish between the concepts of 'canon' and 'classics,' I cannot fully agree with How. It seems to me that canon as structure and classics as agency should not be opposed to each other but rather thought of as two sides of the same reality. Even in a religious context, the canon cannot be imagined as a dead and static legacy of the past, merely serving as a monument. Canonical religious texts are an active source of life for the religious community, as they are constantly read, experienced, and interpreted in light of new historical circumstances. Similarly, the cultural or disciplinary canon is not just a list of texts or theories worthy of being remembered but they serve as a source of inspiration for the present. Henceforth, I will assume that the use of both terms is equally justified, particularly based on the fact that in the research literature on sociology, a clear terminological distinction is not always present. Qualities that some authors attribute to classical works, others ascribe to texts they want to designate as canonical. However, moving forward, I will speak about 'classics' implying that they are also 'canonical.'

Let's start with the question, what does 'classics' refer to in debates about sociology and the social sciences? First of all, a classic should be highly regarded within the scientific community. According to Gianfranco Poggi, classics are simply "the best work the discipline of sociology has produced in the course of its history" (Poggi, 1996, p. 40). Classics stay at the origin of a discipline; they lay its foundation. They serve as a necessary reference point for the unity of the discipline and its relationship to its history and plays "so important a role in the development of [a] discipline or tradition that any history must refer to it" (Thomas, 1992, p. 115 cit. by Baehr, 2002). Classics thus connect the discipline with its past, bridging the gap between archaic pre-disciplinary times and modernity. At the same time, classical texts do not merely belong to the past; they remain relevant to the present. Even if their achievements have long been surpassed, they continue to inspire new generations of scholars. Classics are works that must be read, or whose implications must be incorporated into the broader understanding of a discipline, in order to effectively work in that field in the present (Anne Furlong cit. by Baehr, 2002, p. 144), they are the part of past cultural achievements that retain their relevance in the

present, continuing to exist and remaining in demand alongside more recent scholarship (Savelieva & Poletaev, 2010, p. 20-22).

The general concept of classics emphasizes the ability of classical texts and ideas to have relevance for the present. However, there are many such texts and ideas in the history of every discipline. So, which characteristics distinguish certain specific names that can be legitimately called the canon? By the time this question began to be actively discussed, sociology had already a situation where particular importance in university courses and programs was given to the 'Holy Trinity' of founders: Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim. Many felt that this narrow canon did not reflect the contributions of other individuals who had significantly impacted the field. The most prominent candidate for inclusion in the canon was Georg Simmel, but others like Tönnies, Mead, Parsons, Du Bois were also notable. Therefore, the criteria for distinguishing a classic were, of course, related both to already recognized cases and to those aspiring for recognition.

Here are a few of the most significant aspects scholars have mentioned as the most relevant for recognizing the author's importance for sociology. First, the author must contribute to developing the conceptual framework that enables sociology to emerge as a distinct field of research. They offer a set of highly sophisticated and powerful conceptual tools, a radically new set of metaphors for grasping social reality, "useful for raising interesting questions, solving theoretical puzzles, and preparing the ground for more empirically oriented substantive theories" (Mouzelis, 1994, p. 246). At the same time, different classics of sociology don't need to agree with each other. On the contrary, they can represent opposing viewpoints, creating theoretical tension and dialogue: "what makes canons function is the fact that each classical author offers a singular set of metaphors for grasping the world that either ignores or rejects another set of metaphors" (Illouz, 2003, p. 91).

Second, the works of these authors should have a lasting impact on the community, generating new approaches or fostering discussion. They should be able to attract cultural recognition, be controversial and culturally resonant, that is they should be either vital for a particular cultural project or spark controversy (Baehr, 2002, pp. 120–122). This means they should be perceived today not as mere antiquities, but as effective tools for understanding society, capable of generating new meanings in new historical circumstances. As Alan How argues, in

becoming classic, the author's ideas are taken up by others and shown to be productive in myriad different ways (How, 2016, p. 4).

Third, classical works should possess such a richness of content that they allow multiple and sometimes opposing interpretations. Peter Baehr calls it 'textual suppleness' which lets a work to assume "different significance for different interpreters at different times" (Baehr, 2002, p. 122). Alan How describes this quality of classic texts in terms of Gadamer's hermeneutics, where the meaning of a text is determined by its interaction with the reader's horizon of meanings and expectations. In this way "the classic reveals its continuity with the past, not by staying the same, but by repeatedly becoming different" (How, 2016, p. 204).

As I have pointed out earlier, attempts to explain the role and significance of classics for sociology arose in the context where certain names had already been established in the Anglophone tradition as having special importance as representatives of 'classical sociology.' They are Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim. The formation of this canon did not occur overnight, but by the 1980s it seemed already well-established. It is believed that the particular prominence of Weber and Durkheim was a legacy of Talcott Parsons' school, while Marx entered the pantheon as a result of the surge of interest in Marxism and post-Marxist theories in the 1960s and later (Connell, 1997). Anyway, by the mid-1980s it was difficult to find a sociology curriculum where reading the classical texts of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim was not a mandatory requirement.

In his discussion of the core classics of sociology, Peter Baehr recognizes that the works of Marx, Weber and Durkheim possess profound aesthetic quality and pathos (Baehr, 2002, p. 3). However, he notes that aesthetic profundity alone does not guarantee a text's rise to classical status: "a text must not only be great but also be recognized as such, and this recognition is a culturally mediated process." Perhaps the most important reason for their canonization, according to Baehr, is that these figures were seen as discursive founders of modern sociology. Primarily, they were credited with establishing a specific discourse, that is 'a stock of presuppositional ideas' central for the sociological tradition. Additionally, these thinkers served as crucial symbolic markers for sociology, providing it with a historical lineage and determining its professional boundaries in relation to other disciplines. In essence, these classics played a vital role in the professional legitimation of sociology.

But as we have seen earlier, the founding role is not sufficient by itself, the classics should prove their vitality and usefulness for current

problems and debates. Perhaps the most striking example we can find is Émile Durkheim who was, according to Alan How, "canonical but not classical" until he was rediscovered by Jeffrey Alexander who initiated the cultural turn in sociology. Alexander challenged the traditional 'positivistic' interpretation of Durkheim and proposed to take into consideration his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Thus, he created a new way of reading Durkheim, making him a relevant source of conceptualization of cultural rituals and traditions. At the same time, the symbolic meaning of Durkheim wasn't completely changed: "The texture of this 'Durkheim' is quite different from that of the earlier one, yet he is still recognizably committed to the central importance of social solidarity in social life" (How, 2016, p. 137). If we speak of the names present in the canon as symbolic representations of a complex of ideas, we see that even through subsequent reinterpretation, certain intellectual content remains associated with the name of Durkheim. In this sense, it seems crucial for canonical concepts to possess a combination of two properties. On one hand, they must be sufficiently ambiguous to give rise to new readings and meanings. On the other hand, they must have a clear conceptual core that allows them to be associated with a definite set of ideas, metaphors, or concepts.

In any way, the disciplinary canon seems to be a contingent historical structure that can certainly be revised or reinterpreted in the future, much like any tradition claiming canonical status. It can be demonstrated that the traditional reference to the sociological 'trinity' was influenced by specific historical factors, such as Marxist movements or Parsons' theoretical preferences. Perhaps even more than in the case of cultural or literary canons, texts recognized as canonical or classic within a discipline can and should be subject to revision as the discipline itself evolves. At the same time, the disciplinary canon seems less ideologically charged compared to the national literary canon, and the criticism often directed at the national literary canon is less likely to hold the same significance for the disciplinary canon.

3. Canon in History of Philosophy

In the final part, I would like to summarize some common properties that I observed in the examples of 'canons' mentioned above, and apply them to the canon of the history of philosophy.

It is worth noting that during the 'canon wars,' the term 'canon' initially carried a negative connotation. It was used to critique notions of 'greatness,' where 'greatness' was attributed only to a small group of authors, predominantly described as 'dead white men.' However, over the course of the discussion, this negative connotation ceased to be the only possible interpretation, and the canon came to be seen more as a structural part of the narrative about the past.

Thus, the canon is a means of constructing the identity of a national, social, or professional group by highlighting a number of authors, texts, or other cultural items, familiarity with which serves as a form of initiation. In the case of academic disciplines, the canon sets their origin and disciplinary boundaries. For broader national or cultural groups, the canon helps to form a narrative about the norms and values that should be inherited from a necessarily imaginary past. In this case, the canon acts as a kind of frame or grid which helps newcomers to be integrated in a society or a disciplinary community. It does not exhaust everything that a novice needs to know about the past of their community, but it constitutes an important element of the tradition that is passed down and is meant to create a bond between old and new generations.

However, it would be mistaken to think that the canon is created solely by the efforts of those responsible for transmitting the tradition (teachers, officials, publishers). The canon is defined by its reception. The canon is what is impersonally 'considered', 'accepted', or 'taken' as excellent or outstanding. Works aspiring to canonical status must be able to resonate with those to whom they are presented as standards of excellence. Today's recipients (students or novice readers) may become its new transmitters tomorrow, and their internal agreement to accept a canonical work as a significant element of their culture or academic discipline largely depends on the work's ability to be understood and appreciated in contemporary historical circumstances. We have seen that this generates a requirement for a work to 'be rich in meaning' and 'be open to multiple interpretations.' A classic example of this can be found in the canonical texts of Sacred Scripture, which in certain religious practices are interpreted as texts with open meanings. These texts can be read by different people in different life circumstances and still provide answers to very personal and individual questions for those who engage with them.

With these preliminary considerations established, I will now turn to the question of the canon in the history of philosophy. Firstly, the philosophical canon seems to align more with the disciplinary canon

than with the cultural or literary canon. Undoubtedly, some philosophical works contribute to the broader tradition and heritage of the Great Books of Western Civilization and are accessible to readers beyond the narrow philosophical community. In this sense, they are more part of the cultural canon. However, the history of philosophy, as part of an introduction to philosophical practice, primarily aims to establish what is important and significant for philosophy as a distinct intellectual practice that deals with concepts and logical connections. The authors usually discussed in the history of philosophy, such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and others form a body of texts that demonstrate what philosophy entails as a practice, how philosophers ask questions, and how they attempt to answer them. Thus, the philosophical canon is primarily about forming an understanding of what philosophy is, making it more similar to a disciplinary canon rather than a cultural one.

But if we consider the philosophical canon as disciplinary, why do we refer to it as a canon and not as classics? I believe the difference lies in the following: In the case of the classics of the social sciences, they are participants in a dialogue, and placing them in the past is an undisputed fact. We understand that we are not meant to practice sociology as Marx, Weber, or Durkheim did. Conversely, referring to canonical authors in the history of philosophy does not require us to constantly situate them in the past. For us, the philosophical classics are simultaneously subject for imitation in how the practice of philosophizing should be carried out.

I will draw on my own experience to illustrate how the concepts of cultural and disciplinary canons intersect in the context of the history of philosophy. In Russian philosophical education, the history of philosophy curriculum includes a small section on Renaissance philosophy. This is a significant cultural period with a considerable number of texts that have firmly established themselves as important works of Western civilization. Accordingly, it is difficult to imagine a course on Renaissance philosophy that does not discuss Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's ideas on human freedom, Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, or Thomas More's *Utopia*. These are undoubtedly essential texts that form part of Europe's intellectual heritage. However, their status as 'philosophical' directly depends on how philosophy is understood as a discipline. If we assume that the distinguishing feature of philosophical practice is the presence of rational arguments, and that philosophical texts of the past should teach us how to recognize, formulate, and criticize arguments, then the aforementioned works may be seen as alien to the philosophical canon because they do not

conform to the standards of rigor typically associated with philosophical texts. However, the question of whether these texts should be included in the canon of the history of philosophy as a discipline does not negate the fact that all these works are significant within the broader cultural canon.

The philosophical canon, like other canons, is not an evil that must be eradicated. It plays an important role in the formation of novices who begin their study of philosophy. It provides them with guidelines that set the rules and standards for the functioning of philosophy as an intellectual practice. At the same time, the specific content of the canon is not untouchable or sacred. Like all other canons, the philosophical canon is open to changes and transformations due to the interests of new generations. Changes in the canon can and should occur to the extent that the definition of the greatness of certain philosophers may depend on new standards that arise in the present. However, this process will depend not only on the activities of transmitters – those who participate in the transmission of tradition and the formation of the canon. It will also depend on the abilities of receivers to resonate with the ideas and images of the past that are presented to them.

Therefore, for the current efforts for expanding the philosophical canon, it would be wise to follow the well-known maxim: "Do what you can, and let what will be, be."

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to examine a few examples of how the canon is understood and how it functions in several fields in the humanities and social sciences. I think it is important to introduce and capture the distinction between a broad cultural canon, a national cultural (literary) canon, and a disciplinary canon. Despite the general structural similarities noted in the last section, disciplinary and cultural canons differ in both their breadth of scope and their function in relation to the cultural or disciplinary community they aim to reproduce. By capturing this distinction, we provide a tool that can bring clarity to the discussion of the canonical status of particular works.

The distinction introduced allows us to see the difficulty that arises when we attempt to discuss the canon of the history of philosophy. It turns out to be both a part of a broad cultural canon, which embodies the most significant achievements of human civilization (as it often turns out –

primarily Western civilization), and an embodiment of the disciplinary canon of philosophy as an academic discipline. The separation of these two aspects, the emancipation of the cultural meaning of philosophy from the disciplinary one, seems to me to be the key task on the way to the current reconsideration of the philosophical canon.

Endnotes

1 Given the vast number of publications on this topic, I won't provide a bibliographical reference. Instead, I will discuss some of the most relevant works later.

2 The most recent monograph dedicated to the question of the canon in philosophy is *Historiography and the Formation of Philosophical Canons* (Lapointe & Reck, 2023).

3 Among the events of last few years can be mentioned: International Conference *How Legitimate is the Philosophical Canon? Concrete Applications from Greek and Chinese Philosophies* (Thessaloniki, 2023), Conference *Questioning 'Western Philosophy': Philosophical, Historical, & Historiographical Challenges* (Oxford, 2023), NYC Workshop in Early Modern Philosophy *Expanding the Canon* (Fordham, 2022), International conference *New Voices on Women in the History of Philosophy* (Padeborn, 2022), Summer School *In and Out - Questioning the Philosophical Canon* (Zagreb, 2019) and many others.

4 https://projectvox.org/about-the-project/

5 The description of historical events is taken from Chaddock (2012); Cross (1995); Mcarthur (1989)

6 In the 1966 edition, Adler added a subtitle *A Guide to Reading the Great Books*.

7 The italics correspond to names which are not included in the original Erskine's list.

8 I'm taking as an example the conception of the national literary heritage elaborated in the US during the 'canon wars', but the relevant discussions about the national literary canon were developed in other countries as well. See, for example, Meyer (2021) for Germany, Kučinskienė et al. (2021) for the Central Europe and Baltic countries, Vdovin (2017) for Russia.

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