

# Richard Kilminster: From Praxis to Process

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*In Hegel's work we find the first great manifestation of a line of thought in which the accent was no longer on the unchanging pattern of nature and reason, but on the changing pattern of history, on the development of mankind (Elias 1962: 40).*

## Introduction

In this paper, I want to reflect upon and assess the enormously rich contribution that Richard Kilminster has made in elaborating and extending Elias's work, especially in the fields of sociological theory and the sociology of knowledge. I will do this by examining three of his major books and interrogating two persistent arguments running throughout them: his discussion of Hegel and Marx, and the relation between sociology and philosophy. Throughout his work, Kilminster has sought to elaborate upon and develop themes from Elias's writings, attempting to find a middle position between the excesses and conceptual failures of Marxism, philosophy, and sociology by developing and expanding upon the sociological synthesis of Norbert Elias, and in that respect, the corpus of work has been underwritten by an attempt to reflexively provide a sociology of sociology. I want to argue that Kilminster's discussion of these important and recursively developed themes, though insightful, is paradoxical. He is highly critical of Marx as compared to Hegel, yet he foregrounds the importance of sociology above what he takes to be an otiose philosophy.

## Praxis and method

His first major work was *Praxis and Method: A Sociological Dialogue with Lukács, Gramsci and the Early Frankfurt School* (1979). The book, like all of Kilminster's scholarship, demonstrates a remarkable breadth of reading, which covers Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci, Horkheimer and Adorno, in addition to Hegel and Marx. The book surveys the concept of praxis as it features in neo-Marxism using a dense Hegelian vocabulary. In the foreword to the second edition (2014), Kilminster forewarns the reader in this regard: 'My sporadic lapses into Hegelian obscurity might try the patience of some readers' (2014: xii). The book is therefore by no means an easy read. This can be discerned from a random quote taken from the book:

Sociologically speaking, close analysis is required to supplement this work by locating the perceptions of tensions in Marx to their elaboration from various standpoints at a subsequent stage of development as aspects of later social configurations, through which mediations alone the tensions have their total historical existence (1979: 4).

The book was written in a context where Marxism versus sociology had become an entrenched intellectual dichotomy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and where political partisanship and neutrality in the social

sciences had become a major topic of debate. Central to Kilminster's enterprise is an examination of the tensions that exist in Marx's writings, and how these become re-expressed or retranslated into the work of Western Marxists including Lukács, Gramsci and Korsch. According to Kilminster (1979: 3), Marx's writings are much less consistent than Marxists admit; instead, he argues, they tend to deify Marx, even though his work contains irreparable tensions. Moreover, Marx's assessment of other writers, primarily Hegel, is selective and simplified, and ultimately invalid. One major tension is between the idea of praxis as an open-ended concept, and the historical closure foisted upon it by Marx's insistence on the idea of inevitable revolution. Thus, on the one hand, Marx criticises Hegel's idealist method through his concept of social beings transforming the material world in an open-ended way through their praxis. Yet, on the other, he regards the proletarian revolution as inevitable and confuses what 'is' with what 'ought to be' (Kilminster 1979).

The Marxist and Hegelian dialectic both contain two moments, 'positivity and the moving principle of negativity' (1979: 9). But there is also a major lacuna in Marx's critique of Hegel. This is evident in his misreading of Hegel as an idealist, one who ignores the material world. Hegel is, however, thoroughly monistic, and Marx's criticism of it a straw man:

Marx regards Hegel's dialectic as a coded, mystified way of talking about the real material activity of men in history. Thus Hegelian alienation for Marx is a speculative product of the *real* alienation of men from their externalised creations and from realization of human potentialities permitted by the level of development of the productive forces of the epoch in which they live. ... Marx, then, instates the primary importance of mundane, profane human practice as the motor of human life and as the creator of an objectivated social world as against Hegel's apparent stress on the activity of consciousness and consequent demotion of human practice to a secondary status. (Although this stress was more associated with Hegelians like Bauer than with Hegel.) For Hegel, however, aspects of finite reality are continually cancelled and reflected back into the universal substance of which they are variously conscious, particular, foreign and alien negations, *in and through and embodied in*, the particular historical consciousness and activity of men. There was never an external Spirit force in Hegel's philosophy. ... In Hegel, stated at the most abstract, what is finite, immediate, practical and particular is both particular and universal at the same time, a circumstance which is self-revealed in the course of historico-natural development (1979: 13–14).

The dualism of matter and spirit misleadingly attributed to Hegel is merely reversed in Marx and expressed in, for example, his base superstructure metaphor. According to Kilminster (1979: 5), neo-Marxists have taken up this flawed misreading of Hegel, Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci and Frankfurt School all call upon the 'activistic elements of the Marxian doctrine'; that is, the praxis of the proletariat. The neo-Marxists readily accept Marx's problematic critique of Hegel, and through 'an over politicized concern with immediate circumstance' confuse *ought* with *is* (Kilminster 1979: 14). As he states with regard to Lukács's mythological notion of the subject-object identical,

Lukács's problem was that his social philosophy dominated his sociology, so it is initially to the latter that we must turn for answering empirical questions about society and its development to which Lukács, locked in his historicalised philosophical anthropology, has barred the way by assuming that he has answered them (Kilminster 1979: 101).

According to Kilminster, sociologists are not subject to a barren choice between bourgeois sociology and critical Marxism. There is a 'third way', and Kilminster (1979: 269) concludes his book with an ironic inversion of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: 'Lenin has merely tried to change the world, the point is to interpret it.'

Elias's influence on Kilminster's first book, though evident in places, appears to be minimal. Though Elias is thanked in the acknowledgements, his work is not referenced anywhere in the book, and even in his discussion of the *Kultur/zivilization* dichotomy, Kilminster makes no reference to Elias but instead (1979: 278) points to the Frankfurt's School's *Aspects of Sociology* (1973 [1956]) and George Iggers's *The German Conception of History* (1968).

## The sociological revolution

In Kilminster's second main work, *The Sociological Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the Global Age* (1998), he attempts to unify a collection of essays written at different periods, with Elias's work becoming central. Kilminster also continues his critical engagement with Hegel and Marx. Hegel's thought, he argues, represents the furthest point that philosophy could reach as a self-contained theoretical discipline before it became sociological. Drawing on Gillian Rose's (1981) idiosyncratic interpretation of Hegel, he argues (Kilminster 1998: 27) that Hegel surmounted a number of Kantian dualisms by claiming that both the 'infinite' and the 'finite' were knowable since the former was actually embedded in the particularities of the finite, and expressed through the concrete universal. Nevertheless, for Kilminster (1998: 44), Hegel's solution to the Kantian dualisms remained trapped within the realms of metaphysics, and it was left to Marx to attempt to move beyond them, particularly through his conception of human practice. Although this represented a massive yet partial breakthrough in the direction of sociology, Kilminster believes that, as a result of the political standpoint that pervaded Marx's work, a number of these dualisms became reproduced particularly in his conception of social being determining social consciousness, and again in the base and superstructure metaphor.

The central theme – as expressed in the title of the book, and which constitutes the second core theme running through his work – is that the emergence of sociology in the late eighteenth century constituted a revolution in knowledge. Here ontological, epistemological and ethical concerns that had previously been solely within the purview of philosophy, became adopted and transformed within a sociological idiom. Thus, in the early nineteenth century the theories of, *inter alia*, de Bonald, Comte, Spencer and Marx not only focused on society as an emerging reality *sui generis*, which could be studied scientifically or empirically, but simultaneously took account of important moral and political considerations in the social world. This approach constituted a sociological revolution.

The response of philosophers to this intellectual encroachment, which resulted in their progressive defunctionalisation, was to create new areas of specialisation and competence to which they could singularly lay claim as experts. Areas including 'pure reasoning' and 'logic', the search for timeless 'transcendental truths', and non-empirical methods of inquiry, all came to characterise their new domains of research. However, one major consequence of this shift in terrain was that many philosophical arguments no longer possessed any empirical evidence, but instead remained credible only as a result of the established prestige that philosophers had accrued as a social group.

This social prestige and high rank also led to many contemporary sociologists, who ranked lower in comparison, to adopt a number of philosophical tenets and modes of thinking. During the 1960s, sociological schools such as phenomenology, ethnomethodology, structuralism and critical theory all found themselves

adopting philosophical concepts from writers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger. However, having acquired a firmer institutional position, contemporary sociologists are now in a position to move away from philosophy's abstract and timeless theorising back to an empirically orientated approach that was initially, but only temporarily, established by the sociological revolution. Kilminster (1998: 145–172) argues that the sociological revolution has by no means been a sudden and clarifying rupture in knowledge; rather, it has been and remains a slow and protracted theoretical upheaval.

In the second section of the book, Kilminster goes on to examine the limits of transcendental philosophy, in which he broadly includes the work of Kant, Hegel, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber and Giddens, as well as sociological schools such as phenomenology, ethnomethodology, critical theory and structuralism. In turn, Giddens's theory of structuration is seen as a world-view in which there are concepts and arguments whose inclusion cannot be accounted for solely in terms of rational or intellectual criteria, but which arise from extra-theoretical factors:

There are tenets in structuration theory the presence of which are not explicable entirely by Giddens having been rationally or intellectually convinced of their soundness, as well as other tacit assumptions of which he is hardly aware. Structuration theory is, on the one hand a metatheory of action, and on the other, a pulling together of a selection of concepts, tenets, assumptions, emphases and normative elements, the unity of which constitutes a world-view. ... [S]ome of these features derive from the traces within structuration theory, as in sociology in general, of the great ideologies of the nineteenth century – liberalism, socialism and conservatism, and their later developments. Others derive from the institutional location of the project and still others from the moral and political convictions of the author (Kilminster 1998: 117).

These factors include the incorporation of liberal, conservative and socialistic political tenets within Giddens's (1984) synthesis. Here, the liberal component, with its belief in the freedom and self-actualisation of the rational individual as a sovereign and autonomous actor, remains dominant, though it is merged with a conservative romanticist view of human relations with nature and with a socialist economic ontology (Kilminster 1998:117). Not only does Giddens's sociology explicitly embrace a philosophical, non-empirical form of inquiry, and remain limited to the study of modernity, it also fails to question how the sociological dualisms with which it is concerned itself, arose historically in the first place. In contrast to all these theories, Kilminster (1998: 131–144) argues that Elias's figurational sociology, through its sociogenetic method, provides an historically broader developmental form of inquiry that can account for social constraint through interdependency, the multi-perspectival positions of actors and an analysis of the changing regulation of affect controls that ground rationality.

## Post-philosophical sociology

In his next major work, *Post-Philosophical Sociology* (2007) Kilminster examines 'the origins, reception and significance of the sociological tradition founded by Norbert Elias' (2007: ix). The book is intended as a companion to *The Sociological Revolution*, especially in terms of criticising the undue influence of philosophy on sociology.

In his discussion of Elias's formation –of 'placing' Elias – Kilminster situates Elias's intellectual development in the turbulent times characterising Weimar Germany. In this context, he points to the importance of

Heidegger's philosophy in shaping Elias's own sociology, and how the latter took up Heidegger's ontological-hermeneutical philosophical concepts to challenge the metaphysical, idealist, and individualistic underpinning of Kantian philosophy:

In my view a strong case can be made, based on knowledge of contemporary philosophical movements and circumstantial evidence, that the attack on Cartesian rationalism, Kantianism and conventional historiography in the work of Heidegger and the philosophers of existence such as Jaspers was highly significant in Elias's development. I think there is in fact sufficient textual evidence of common concerns and thematic parallels with fundamental ontology to justify this interpretation (Kilminster 2007: 19).

Although Elias does not acknowledge Heidegger anywhere in his work, for Kilminster it is likely that he knew his work very well. Moreover, whilst under the influence of Zionism, Elias went on to reject all German philosophy, Heidegger's included, transforming his conceptual framework into a workable, post-philosophical, sociological synthesis:

Questions traditionally grouped by philosophers under epistemology, ontology and ethics (this last field including 'evaluative' or 'normative' questions) reappear in Elias's works transformed into a sociological idiom and related to each other in a comprehensive theory of society. I have already mentioned the transformation of ontological questions. The epistemological questions raised by philosophers were transformed into a comprehensive sociological epistemology. The evaluative questions are to be secured through the 'detour via detachment'. The failure to grasp this 'post-philosophical' feature of Elias's thinking has sometimes led commentators to try to pull him back into the philosophy from which his life's work was a sustained attempt at emancipation and critique or to criticize him from philosophical positions which he regarded himself as already having moved beyond. The crucial point was that whereas Elias simply refused to enter into discussions within a philosophical discourse, not recognizing the authority of philosophy, many of his critics took that recognition for granted. The scope for misunderstanding was thus very great (Kilminster 2007: 32).

Kilminster also challenges the view that Elias was simply a student of Mannheim, suggesting instead that Elias and Mannheim could have reciprocally influenced one another. As well as sharing family resemblances, especially in their respective sociology of knowledges, the thought of the thinkers reveals some marked differences:

Theoretically, Elias draws on Freud in a different way from Mannheim in order to deepen his understanding of the role of fantasy and fear in the struggles between groups in society. Elias's synthesis may be seen as a more coherent integration of psychoanalysis and sociology than that of Mannheim. Elias's paradigm may be seen as outflanking the largely rationalistic approach to which Mannheim's work veered, and from which Elias took his distance. Nor did Elias share Mannheim's immediate commitment of sociology to the guiding of practical measures, particularly through planning, to effect changes in the wider society, broadly within the tradition of liberalism. Rather, Elias took a longer term, more detached view. He thus had a more circumspect attitude towards the possibilities of controlling blind social forces through planning

and advocated first building up more reliable knowledge of social processes (Kilminster 2007: 43).

Kilminster (2007:101–130) goes on to provide a nuanced sociogenesis of Elias's use of the involvement and detachment couplet, demonstrating how the conceptual dyad helps us move beyond the Weberian notion of value freedom and neutrality, Marxist discussions of science and ideology, and simultaneously avoids the reason–passion dichotomy. According to Kilminster (2007: 112–130), in order to understand their usage as operating as a balance within a continuum, we should not see them in voluntaristic terms as authors' decisions to be involved or detached but sociologically, with regard to the development of drive economies and the balance between id-ego-superego, and processes entailing the institutionalisation of detachment.

In a paper that could be read as an extension of his post-philosophical sociology, 'Karl Marx: new perspectives' (2018) he recursively extends his criticisms of Marx. In the paper, he reappraises 'the scientific status of Marx as a sociological pioneer' in the development of sociology as a discipline, and to the development of a relatively detached sociology. There is, he argues a need

for a new version of Marx's contribution to sociology, as such, correcting for the overestimations of his stature that have accrued from the codification of his ideas for political purposes in mass parties and social movements in the twentieth century (2018: 253).

Kilminster argues that the early political codification of Marx's ideas by German Social Democratic Party effectively de-Hegelianised his work, something reinforced by Lenin and Soviet Marxists. In creating a mythology about Marx, such political determinations even suffused the translations of his work, the majority of which was not intended for publication – Marx only published three major sole-authored works in his lifetime. Evidence of this overestimation, over-interpretation and mythologisation of Marx is visible in the canonisation of his hastily composed *Theses on Feuerbach*, which are often dehistoricised and misread as a contribution to epistemology or sociological theory, rather than political change and the justification of political ideals. Marx himself was an intransigent thinker, a lifelong advocate of revolution in the face of reformist politics. His struggle with Hegel effectively carried over the teleological aspects of the latter's work, of the proletariat as negation of the negation, and the inevitability of socialism emerging from the historical confrontation of labour and capital. Marx's sole preoccupation with politics led to a failure to develop issues and fields of inquiry he only hinted at, such as the sociology of science, sociology of knowledge – both of which remain trapped in a largely polemical critique of political economy. However, other writers of a more reformist bent did engage with wider debates that we would now label as 'sociological'. These included Comte, Saint-Simon, Considerant, Pecquer and von Stein. These writers not only anticipated Marx's insights concerning the nature of capitalism, but also in the case of von Stein, wrote more effectively on the state and the institutionalisation of conflict.

Marx's reception into British academia took place during the conflict phase of sociology between 1965 and 1980 (Kilminster 2018: 231). This was a time when large amounts of Continental philosophy including the work of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Sartre was also being incorporated into the discipline. Sociology itself had a limited institutional presence in the UK in this period (see Kilminster, this volume). Instead of raising the issue of the scientific stature of Marx stripped of mythology and political overstatements, there existed a

theoretical cacophony, generated by these intricate and often highly emotional political and philosophical debates about the first principles of the human sciences, which shaded over into a generation's search for new behavioural codes (Kilminster 2018: 250).

It was in this context that Althusser's anti-humanist Marxism became unreflexively imported into British sociology (Kilminster 2018: 252). This not only prevented a fuller understanding of Marx's writings as a whole, including his scientific stature, but 'divorced from the effects of political misrepresentation ... laid a false trail away from Marx's work as a form of "humanism" in the broadest sense, which it evidently was' (Kilminster 2018: 253).

Moreover, Marx's work was limited, it only recognised one major dimension of power: economic power. The Marx who has survived in academic sociology valorises a 'value-committed', 'critical' sociology as the 'leading and only morally legitimate approach' (Kilminster 2018: 256). This contrasts with a 'value-free sociology' that fails to distinguish between autonomous and heteronomous evaluations in sociology. This 'critical tendency' runs the risk of 'over-critique'.

## Assessment

How do we assess this penetrating and nuanced work? Rather than criticising Kilminster's work, which I regard as powerful, inspiring and original, I would rather like to provide some thoughts and reflections on some of his key arguments and tease out some ambiguities in his position. Without wishing to reduce his varied and broad intellectual engagements, it could be argued in some respects that Kilminster's own approach can be summarised in a comment he makes about Elias:

In relation to the mainstream disciplines of philosophy, psychology and history, the factions and schools within professional sociology, as well as towards Marxism and other ideologies, Elias declares a 'plague on all your houses' (2007: ix-x).

Kilminster sees the binary between Marxism and bourgeois sociology as both unhelpful and politically loaded. We can see that his major focus in the integration of the sociology of knowledge and sociological theory is an attempt to develop an Eliasian sociology that offers a more fruitful perspective that transcends the misleading and divisive opposition inherent in both Marxism and sociology more generally. In that sense, it provides a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, a sublation of these problematical positions. Marxism, though offering some important insights, is fundamentally marred by its political and normative drive, while sociology, particularly in the UK, draws too heavily on metaphysical philosophy, given the latter's prestige and status within the academy. Both of these arguments are rooted in Elias's work. The former is discussed by Elias in various writings, but most importantly those focusing on scientific establishments (2009). By contrast, the latter is most clearly articulated in a hitherto unpublished essay entitled 'Karl Marx as a sociologist and a political ideologist' – available in Elias's *Collected Works* (2012). Although Kilminster's critique of Marx developed prior to the publication of Elias's essay, some of his later criticisms of Marx also point to the contradiction between Marxism as a science and Marxism as a political ideology. Moreover, Kilminster is not only more detailed, but also more extensive in his critique of Marx. I have discussed some of the limitations of Elias's critique of Marx elsewhere (Loyal 2013), so will not repeat them here. Nevertheless, of some significance is the dialectical nature of his critique, which is always balanced by admiration:

All this points very clearly, on the one hand, to the greatness of Marx's sociological achievement. He brought together theoretically a whole range of key problems of social development, and thereby made them accessible to further scientific work. It points, on the other hand, to the unavoidable limitation that the time-bound material of his experience imposed on his theoretical construction, and to the damage inflicted on the Marxian thought-edifice by the fact that its function as the Bible of a great political movement constantly obscures its function as a pioneering work of sociology (Elias 2012: 197).

Elias also persistently recognises Marx's fundamental contribution to the development of sociology:

[I]f one includes among the ancestral figures of sociology not only Comte and Durkheim, but also Marx who would have fiercely attacked anyone calling him a sociologist, for that would have meant to him a "a follower of Comte". Yet, one cannot omit Marx; whether or not one shares his ideals, he made a significant contribution to the development of a basic theory of society' (Elias 1962: 52).

Kilminster, by contrast, although not simply one-sided in his critical analysis, is certainly more averse to Marx in tone, if not in substance.

In *Praxis and Method*, Kilminster criticises Marx for constructing Hegel as a straw man figure, using this as the basis of his 'invalid' attack. In the preface to the second edition (Kilminster 2014: xiv), he refers to Marx's critique as 'primitive'. Of course, one needs to accept that Hegel's position is often caricatured by Marx within the heat of polemic (Arthur 1986: 74). Nevertheless, *pace* Kilminster, Marx's critique of Hegel was complex and many-sided, traversing his philosophy and his politics and moving between discussions of religion, the law, the state, civil society and political economy. It was not just about a simple distinction and reversal of materialism and idealism, as later became the accepted interpretation especially after Engels's problematic gloss on Marx's writings after the latter's death. Marx's critique of Hegel and the Young Hegelians, with which it is often conflated, comes from a position of monism rather than dualism. Its core concern was to reconcile the opposition between materialism and idealism without giving either primacy. In my reading, Marx does not suggest that Hegel fails to look at material activity *per se* in his analysis, rather it remains underdetermined: As he notes with regard to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

The great thing in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final result – the dialectic of negativity as the moving and producing principle – is that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as a loss of object as alienation and as sublation of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of labour and conceives objective man ... as the result of his own labour (Marx 1975: 332–3).

As I understand it, and following Arthur (1986) and Mészáros (1986), Marx criticises Hegel for: ultimately reducing this activity of (i) humans to self-consciousness and to spiritual labour; (ii) the identification of objectivity with estrangement; (iii) the claim that spirit 'is at home in its other being as such'; (iv) and Hegel's failure to go beyond 'negation of negation' to the self-sustaining positive (Arthur 1986: 60; Mészáros 1971).

One central criticism, deriving from Feuerbach, is that Hegel inverts subjects and predicates: 'i.e., that he had understood and presented an independent entity as an attribute, whereas something occurring only as an



attribute of an independently existing object was presented as being itself an independent entity' (Ilting 1984: 93). As Ilting expands,

Hegel sought to comprehend the state as an object which existed independently of the individuals living in a state community and credited these individuals themselves with only a dependent existence. ... Hegel had thereby reduced the state itself to no more than an embodiment of an abstract "Idea" (1984:93).

This criticism of reified concepts treated as self-moving personifications, for example, the State or the Idea, instead of analysing real human individuals and their activity, was bound up with Marx's critique of Hegel's speculative idealism. Here history is seen as the logical unfolding of categories, which although recognising the material world, foreground Absolute Spirit. Writing after *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács noted in a 1926 essay that

Hegel's tremendous intellectual contribution consisted in the fact that he made theory and history dialectically relative to each other, grasped them in dialectical reciprocal penetration. Ultimately, however, his attempt was a failure. He could never get as far as the genuine unity of theory and practice; all that he could do was either to fill the logical sequence of the categories with rich historical material, or rationalize history, in the shape of a succession of forms, structural changes, epochs, etc., which raised them to the level of categories by sublimating and abstracting them' (cited and translated in Mészáros 1986: 117).

Bourdieu pithily expressed this by stating that Marx criticised Hegel for 'confusing the things of logic for the logic of things' (Bourdieu 1987: 7). There is, then, a sense that, although Marx may have at times overstated his criticism of Hegel, rather than the Young Hegelians, he was correct for criticising the former as *ultimately* an idealist, as Hegel saw himself – albeit an objective idealist. Human social activity and social relations play an underdetermined role in Hegel's analysis, they are an effect of the logical unfolding of conceptual categories as Spirit comes to know itself.

In the *Sociological Revolution*, Kilminster adds a further criticism of Marx. Despite transcending some dualisms, Marx, he argues, often slipped back into dualistic metaphysical and economically reductionist thinking (1998: 50). However, Marx's assertion that 'social being determines consciousness' was not an attempt to prioritise the material over the ideal, as Kilminster suggests, but was written in a context which questioned or denied the very possibility of distinguishing the material from the ideal and was principally aimed at other Young Hegelians – including the Bauer brothers and David Strauss. Consciousness for Marx was a facet of social activity or social being, and its separation from the latter or from 'the individuals [who] are its basis and ... their actual conditions' (1987 [1846]: 276) was for him an inadmissible form of ideology. The same argument has been convincingly extended by Derek Sayer in *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987) in relation to the base–superstructure metaphor (though E.P. Thompson (1978) and Alistair MacIntyre (1953) have made the same point before).

Finally, following Elias's attempts to situate Marx in a developmental perspective and understand his limitations as arising from his social and historical position, Kilminster is also concerned to 'assess [Marx's] originality' (2018: 236). However, it remains unclear what sociological role such a question serves. Of course, Kilminster is attempting to debunk the mythological status Marx has acquired in the discipline, but as a sociological question it remains obscure. We can certainly accept that Marx was not an 'original' thinker;

instead, like Elias he offered a profoundly original synthesis writing at an earlier stage of social development but attuned to different problems. Correlatively, he also wrote at a time when there existed a different level of development in the stock of reality-congruent knowledge available to him. However, we may also wish to see the development of thought and thinkers in more sociological terms. In his lectures at the University of Sussex in 1991, which I attended as a graduate student, Istvan Mészáros often remarked that if Marx had not written what he had written, somebody else would have written it. For Mészáros, a student of Lukács, this entailed a social view of knowledge and knowledge production, where Marx, to use Hegel's notion developed in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (2001 [1837]: 45), constituted a 'world historical' figure akin to Napoleon. That is a figure who refracted a developing social process, a broader reality, embodying a zeitgeist, or a constellation of emerging and contradictory forces. In that sense, we do not need to know how 'original' Marx (or Napoleon was). Such a concern with originality or creativity in some ways remains trapped in the Durkheimian notion of the 'cult of the individual', a pervasive theme in today's societies of individuals.

Marx had a vast and contradictory theoretical and political output with many shifts of emphases given his work simultaneously constituted a theoretical intervention and a political practice. He also changed his position with regard to revolution. Kilminster (2018) at one point recognises this, but also then goes on to deny it, arguing instead that Marx was an intransigent revolutionary who saw revolution as the only means of a transition to socialism. Both Marx and Engels, especially in their later writings, however, envisaged the possibility of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism given the existence of certain social conditions (Schaff 1973: 265). In his speech to The First International Working Men's Association, also referred to as the Hague Congress of the International, on 8 September 1872, Marx stated that

Someday the worker must seize political power in order to build up the new organization of labor; he must overthrow the old politics which sustain the old institutions, if he is not to lose Heaven on Earth, like the old Christians who neglected and despised politics. But we have not asserted that the ways to achieve that goal are everywhere the same. You know that the institutions, mores, and traditions of various countries must be taken into consideration, and we do not deny that there are countries – such as America, England, and if I were more familiar with your institutions, I would perhaps also add Holland – where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the lever of our revolution must be force; it is force to which we must some day appeal in order to erect the rule of labor (Marx 1962 [1872]).

Marx did not have one catch all theory, but instead recognised that different societies had different social conditions which had to be individually considered. In the social and political conditions extant at the time, he believed that England, the Netherlands and the USA could move peacefully towards a socialist society (Eagleton 2011: 192).

This is not to suggest that Marx is free from errors and contradictions in his work. Only that the errors are not as egregious or straightforward as Kilminster sometimes claims. Marx is occasionally and unnecessarily too critical of Hegel in the course of his 'critical settling of accounts' with him but, later in his life, he also defends Hegel from many of his detractors who saw him as a 'dead dog'.

The second major theme running through Kilminster's work concerns the over-reliance of sociologists on philosophy, criticising its individualistic and ahistorical character. In this respect, I am wholly sympathetic to his argument. However, what Kilminster does not note is that even philosophers have talked about ending philosophy, including for example Marx (1987 [1846]), Wittgenstein (1967), and Nietzsche (1994 [1876]). Moreover, philosophy is a broad discipline and it is not exhausted by 'neo-Kantian' or 'metaphysical' thinking

as Kilminster implies. There are concepts that can be usefully taken from philosophers – albeit critically: Wittgenstein (1967) on language as a practice, despite his failure to historicise language games (Loyal and Quilley 2015); Merleau-Ponty (1962) on the body and bodily schemes, which Bourdieu applies through his notion of habitus and culture (Bourdieu 1977); Mead's (1962 [1934]) quasi-Hegelian discussion of the "I" and the "Me" before it was encased and distorted in the individualised framework of Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism. There is also a tension here in Kilminster's discussion, on the one hand philosophy is chastised, yet he also acknowledges the great parallels and influence of Heidegger on Elias.

However, as much as I would reject some philosophy, I would reject some sociology for being, on the one hand, atheoretical and ahistorical, and on the other, overly theoretical and metaphysical. The increasing division of labour in the subject means that it has become fragmented. Hence, when Kilminster argues that, given their different institutional prestige, sociologists often incorporate the arguments of philosophers uncritically, he probably needs to be less general and speak of *social* theory. In addition, current popular sub-branches of sociology include positivistic forms of rational-choice theory, data analytics, as well the more interpretive orientation of cultural studies and its embrace of cultural left and identity politics. Members of the cultural Left often fail to recognise, using Bourdieu's words, that 'social problems are not sociological problems' or 'good intentions make for bad sociology' (Bourdieu 1992: 5). Kilminster's does not necessarily discuss philosophy in terms of the 'minority of its worst', and sociology in terms of 'the minority of its best', to use Elias's (1994: 106) expressions from the *Established and Outsiders*, but his discussion of sociology and philosophy could be slightly more refined. The work of philosophers could be either worthless or useful, but this remains an empirical question. It may instead be usefully interpreted through Bourdieu's notion of a contested academic field characterised by heterodox and orthodox attempts at producing knowledge:

Philosophers who apply their minds to the social sciences may, depending on their training and the position they occupy in the field, either use the prestige of philosophy in order to impose their theoretical terrorism by laying down the law concerning scientific practices they know nothing about, or, starting from a real knowledge of the technique and questions relevant to a given scientific practice, proceed to a legitimate review of the epistemological assumptions implicit in any scientific practice (Bourdieu 1967: 210).

For Bourdieu, the latter included Bachelard's (1985) study of the philosophy of science, Piaget's (1959 [1923]) experiments that attempted to examine the origins of the processes of logical thought, and Canguilhem's (1994) attempt to bring out the philosophy of science from the history of science. These thinkers lend sociology a 'theoretical assistance it needs, if only by pursuing the generic question of the conditions that make possible any scientific practice' (Bourdieu 1967: 211). Bourdieu, is perhaps, too reverential towards these rationalist philosophers and lacks a more rigorous historical and processual vocabulary, but the point he makes about differences within philosophy, oppositions, orthodoxies and heterodoxies in the intellectual field, and whether they produce valid or invalid insights as an empirical question, is a good one.

Kilminster talks of Heidegger's unacknowledged influence on Elias but we could also see the importance of Hegel, someone, as I have stated, Kilminster admirably attempts to defend in *Praxis and Method* and in *The Sociological Revolution*. Elias adopts a processual model from Hegel which itself derives from the philosophers of motion and ultimately, from Heraclitus (Botton 2012). Like Hegel, as discussed in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2002 [1807]) and *The Philosophy of Right* (2002 [1831]), Elias examines social processes relationally, understands the integration of processes within totalities, for example emotions as organically interlinked; recognises the social nature of humans and the self – albeit discussed by Hegel metaphysically in terms of the master–bondsmen dialectic; deploys the terms 'I–We' balances that Hegel

refers to in terms of 'The I who is the We and the We who is the I'; foregrounds the importance of interdependencies and the development of division of labour; emphasises how societies understand themselves in terms of freedom, etc. In fact, it could be argued from a sociology of knowledge standpoint, that Elias shares with Hegel and Heidegger what Mannheim (1986) refers to as a 'conservative thought-style'. In his discussion of conservatism, Mannheim distinguishes between bourgeois liberalism with its individualistic and abstracted 'natural-law' style of thought and a countervailing conservative thought style that arose in its wake. In consequence, 'conservative thought' takes its form and character from 'natural law' thought. Its ideals are the negation of the bourgeois-liberal ideals, reluctantly offered by participants in a form of life legitimated by unspoken and inarticulate tradition. Uncomfortable with the universalism and abstraction of ideas *per se*, conservative romanticism has to be goaded into articulation. Conservatism is concrete and holistic in response to the abstraction and atomism of natural law. Hegel, Heidegger and Elias all incline towards the more 'conservative' end of the pole – without including Heidegger's 'revolutionary conservatism' (Bourdieu 1988). Yet Elias also transcends many of the pitfalls of the conservative thought-style (Loyal and Quilley 2015) and is, as Kilminster rightly notes, less metaphysical in developing a thoroughly sociological framework.

## Conclusion

I have tried to engage with a few of the many important arguments that Kilminster has made throughout his work. Given their complexity, I may have misread or misinterpreted some of these. There is a certain paradox at play in his various critiques of sociology, philosophy, and Marxism. On the one hand, he wishes to criticise sociology for its unnecessary deference to philosophy; yet at the same time, one of the major proponents of dissolving philosophy, Marx, is treated more harshly than perhaps the philosopher *par excellence*, Hegel. Moreover, the valuable sociological insights of Hegel are not fully extended to interpreting Elias.

Many of my disagreements with Kilminster concern differences of emphases, though given my academic training, I certainly tend to read Marx with a greater 'principle of charity' and I would perhaps not dismiss *all* philosophy, though most of it! This should in no way detract from Kilminster's enormous sociological contribution.

What more can we ask of any academic? Kilminster's own social trajectory saw him establishing an intellectual relationship with Elias beginning in 1971 while still a master's student and ending with Elias's death in 1990. Through this close connection, Kilminster has provided a magnificent body of penetrating and insightful work, contributing or pushing further our reality congruent social stock of scientific knowledge. He has not only extended Elias's sociological insights but also produced an original body of work with enduring power and significance available to new generations of social scientists. More than anything, he has shown that Elias is not simply one sociologist amongst others, demonstrating the specificity of Elias's work, its importance and its implications. In beautifully written prose Kilminster has conveyed and assessed epistemological arguments and concepts that are unavoidably dense, displaying a depth of insight and breadth of reading which one rarely comes across. Although Kilminster rightly criticises transcendentalism for its metaphysical *a priori* universals, his own analysis can be said to show the conditions of possibility of how sociology emerged and shifted, unlike transcendentalism, through concepts which are historically and empirically grounded. Following Elias, what Kilminster calls a sociogenetic approach (and which is also present in Marx, Mannheim and Bourdieu) allows him to explain precisely what is taken for granted or left unquestioned by most other sociologists. It enables him to provide a 'sociology of sociology' facilitating us in Elias's words, as expressed in the documentary about his life (de Swaan and De Bos 1975) – to 'orient ourselves realistically in our world'.

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