

# Richard Kilminster and "Post-philosophical" Sociology: Editors' Introduction to the Special Issue on "the Sociology of Sociology in Long-term Perspective"

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## Introduction

Contemporary sociology demonstrates a tendency toward the neglect of the sociology of knowledge alongside the fragmentation of the discipline into sub-fields, the privileging of narrow empirical investigation, and an aversion to “dead European white men” as Eurocentric, canonical throwbacks at odds with contemporary identity politics and theoretical eclecticism (see Bhambra 2016a for an alternative reading). For example, in the UK, the side-lining of the sociology of knowledge is also reflected in research governance, symbolised in the renaming of the major funding body from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to the *Economic and Social Research Council* (ESRC) in 1983 at the behest of Margaret Thatcher, who questioned the value of social science research from her fervent ideological position. Beyond the UK, the more recent privileging of “impactful” research of demonstrable economic and social benefit, the largely unproblematised and seemingly omnipresent methodological approach of “co-production”, and the clamour for interdisciplinarity are discernible on an international scale (see Scott, this issue). For example, at the EU level what we might term “co-produced-impactful-interdisciplinarity” also shapes the research funding landscape, and encourages a mode of research which ‘bypasses the radical questioning of its own operations and of its own instruments of thinking’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 236). The demand for research with clear impacts, the privileging of economics among policy elites, and the pressure on research to provide solutions to pressing societal and global problems all contribute to a “retreat into the present” (Elias 1987b) and to the relative displacement of the sociology of knowledge from contemporary sociological endeavours.

Just as the sociology of knowledge has been relatively neglected in contemporary social science, so too has the important work of the diminishing number of sociological scholars devoted to it. Yet the increasing drift to presentism, alongside growing populism and polarisation in the twenty-first century, marks the sociology of knowledge out as particularly crucial in seeking to understand contemporary developments and cleavages (see Law and Mennell 2017) and aid the shift to a more reality-congruent fund of knowledge on human societies. The recent experiences in Hungary and the attack on the influential Central Eastern University in Budapest on the part of Victor Orban’s right-wing government, for example, underscore the relationship between knowledge, power, interdependence and process. They also remind us that knowledge is certainly not unilinear and does not ‘progress’ in a straight line. Far from peripheral then, the sociology of knowledge is

a critical prerequisite if human societies at all spatial scales are to edge toward a more equitable and harmonious interdependence (Elias 1987a). Yet there remains a relative intergenerational gap between classical sociology's attention to its own historical development and cognitive tools on the one hand, and more contemporary trends, such as the cultural turn and postcolonial theory on the other (the recent work of Gurinder Bhambra is a notable exception in this regard (see Bhambra 2016a; 2016b; Bhambra and de Sousa Santos 2017)).

The papers in this issue offer a range of perspectives on these debates and the role of Norbert Elias and figurational sociology more broadly within them, from advocating for a more open and conciliatory sociology (Scott), to the potential 'reconciliation' of process sociology and critical theory (Linklater), to arguing for sociology's replacement of philosophy (Joly). This special issue seeks to contribute to the revitalisation of the sociology of knowledge as a pressing requirement for the social sciences in the contemporary period. It pivots on the relatively neglected sociological contribution of Richard Kilminster and includes contributions from his peers, former students and other scholars influenced by his writings. The collection emerges from an international conference held in April 2018 at the University of Leeds, UK where he has worked since the 1970s, titled 'The Sociology of Sociology in Long-Term Perspective: A Conference in Honour of Richard Kilminster'. [1][#N1]. The conference sought to mark Kilminster's unique contribution and help provide a bridge from classical to contemporary sociology for a younger generation of sociologists. It also spoke to the aims of ensuring a legacy in terms of reaffirming the centrality of the sociology of knowledge to the future of the discipline, and the continued dissemination of Elias's ideas on the relationship between knowledge, social process and power. These themes carry forward to this special issue, which is based on papers from that conference. What follows in this brief Introduction is a summary of Kilminster's distinctive approach to the sociology of sociology and an overview of the varied contributions to this special issue.

## Towards a "post-philosophical" sociology

Richard Kilminster has made a profound and unique contribution to sociology on a number of levels, but particularly through his extensive research and writings on the sociology of knowledge. This research has centred on crucial sociological themes, which might appear peripheral (or even archaic) to many contemporary sociologists, such as the relationship between philosophy and sociology, the latter's break from the former, the development of the sociology of knowledge, and the detailed tracing of the origins of Norbert Elias's radical theoretical synthesis (Kilminster 1979; 1993; 1998; 2004; 2007; 2018). For example, he has evidenced the previously unacknowledged personal and intellectual connections between Elias and Mannheim (1993; 2004) and also articulated Elias's break from the Frankfurt School as part of a wider splintering of sociology onto two different tracks (2014). In a period of interdisciplinarity and fragmentation within sociology, Kilminster has contributed to an important synoptic understanding of the development of sociology, to maintaining its grounding as a 'post-philosophical' discipline (see Joly 2017a; 2017b; and this issue), and to an awareness of the importance of a historical perspective in understanding the developmental, relational, and power-laden nature of knowledge. In the process, he has also advanced and clarified concepts such as 'social misdiagnosis' and 'over-critique' involving measured critiques of Christopher Lasch and Zygmunt Bauman respectively (Kilminster 2008; 2013).

Central to these endeavours is Kilminster's long-standing engagement with figurational, or process, sociology and his consistent promotion and dissemination of Elias's "workable synthesis". In this regard, Kilminster has been a key figure in securing a broader understanding of Elias's legacy. For example, through his editorship of *The Symbol Theory* (Elias 1991) and his role as Chair of the Editorial Advisory Group in the production of the English edition of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias. There are few scholars remaining globally who are

pursuing similar important lines of inquiry, or who have the breadth and depth of theoretical knowledge to do so. This makes his distinctive contribution all the more important in terms of intergenerational transfer (see Gabriel and Mennell 2011).

Who would set themselves the extraordinarily challenging task of situating Norbert Elias's unique sociological approach within the wider historical development of the discipline and, by extension, philosophical thought? Such an undertaking necessarily involves a deep and wide-ranging engagement (and commitment), not only with Elias's voluminous writings, but also with the disparate ideas and thinkers that influenced and preceded him. Elias's distinct process (or figurational) sociology is extremely difficult to situate in the spectrum of sociological theory: he seems to 'fall between all the stools' of the recent paradigms in sociology (Kilminster 1993). This task is made all the more challenging by the limited references to the work of others within Elias's writings. This deliberate lack of overt engagement with the theories of others was a strategy that reflected Elias's eschewing of 'elaborate in-house sociological discussions' (Kilminster 1987: 215) that merely diverted from the primary task at hand – empirical research. Yet, Kilminster has not only taken up this challenge with remarkable rigour and enthusiasm, but his body of work also demonstrates a steadfast commitment to an incremental understanding of the *process* of sociology, developed through painstaking research, in contradistinction to the topical eclecticism of many of his sociological peers. This body of work has not only resulted in advancing Elias's ideas, but also contributed to the clarification of the relationship between sociology and philosophy.

Kilminster captures the radical nature of Elias's rejection of false philosophical antinomies and his departure from transcendental thinking in advocating for an understanding of Elias as a "post-philosophical" sociologist. One for whom 'transcendental thinking produces empty generalizations buttressed by nothing more than the authority of the philosophers' establishment' (Kilminster 2007: 151). For Kilminster (2007), it is not the difficulty or obscurity of Elias's work which makes it so demanding, but what must be given up and unlearned: philosophy, Marxism, dualisms etc. Kilminster's commitment to revealing, clarifying, disseminating and tracing Elias's unique approach is of great value to subsequent generations of sociologists in clearly articulating the way in which the sociology of knowledge is in-built into Elias's workable synthesis, reflecting the fact that human knowledge always develops *within* dynamic human figurations.

In the diverse contributions that follow, Kilminster's body of work is assessed, situated and reflected upon by scholars engaged in the sociology of knowledge to differing degrees and who have been influenced by Kilminster's sustained 'attempt to reflexively provide a sociology of sociology' (Loyal, this volume). Collectively, they also offer some critical reflections, highlight points of divergence, and discuss areas for further clarification and investigation. It is hoped that, at the very least, this special issue may prompt, prod and provoke contemporary social scientists of different persuasions into an engagement with the sociology of knowledge and thereby help equip them with the necessary tools for guarding against over-involvement, over-critique and for contributing to a more reflexive and reality-congruent fund of knowledge.

## Outline of the special issue

**Marc Joly** has picked up the baton from Kilminster in situating Elias's sociology and his work arguably represents the clearest example of Kilminster's handing on the torch to the next generation (though see also Loyal, this issue). Joly sets out the core of his thesis in presenting sociology's 'threefold calling' and acknowledges his debt to Kilminster. The latter having aided his grasp of sociology's central task of integrating social and psychic processes, and also his recognition of sociology as a "post-philosophical" discipline. Joly sets out this threefold calling, both developmentally and epistemologically, and argues that

sociology is intended to replace philosophy, complement psychology, and to integrate history, economics, politics and anthropology into a totalising social science (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Joly 2017a).

**Alan Scott** concurs with the view that Kilminster's contribution has received insufficient attention to date, and sees a key aspect of that contribution as putting 'sociology on the front foot and off the defensive'. Yet maintaining a consistent position in opposition to, and rejection of, philosophy, Marxism, the cultural turn, or postcolonial theory, for example, potentially means foregoing academic rewards that more readily accrue through 'playing the game', as well as isolating oneself from wider sociological trends and developments. Contrary to Joly, Scott advocates for a more pluralistic view of the role of sociology, calling for an 'open' sociology which acts as a broker between disciplines rather than entering into border disputes and claims on its own behalf. Such an approach, he suggests, may also prove profitable in taking figurational sociology to the next stage and extending its reach and influence.

**Andrew Linklater's** entry point is Kilminster's (2014) insightful essay on sociology's two tracks. In that essay, Kilminster sets out the departure of Elias (and others) along the track of detachment, distinct from the critical or emancipatory track followed by Marx and the Frankfurt School. In a similar vein to Scott, Linklater seeks to encourage discussion and debate about the potential emancipatory dimensions of Elias's position which he discerns in the normative statements that pepper Elias's writings from time to time. Kilminster's insights on Elias's theory of involvement and detachment are drawn upon in emphasising the latter's humanistic, or 'humanity-centred', orientation. Linklater suggests that recent research that has sought to utilise Elias's framework in exposing the negative effects of public policy on outsider groups can provide a useful bridge to scholars of a more critical persuasion.

**Steven Loyal** sees a commonality in the works of Foucault, Bourdieu and Elias in terms of their respective attention and approaches to the sociology of sociology, but shows how Kilminster has sought to extend Elias's developmental and historical framework and, in the process, assisted sociologists in orientating themselves within a complex social world. Loyal engages in-depth with Kilminster's trilogy of books (1979; 1998; 2007) teasing out themes and continuities in his work, while also offering reflections on some of their key insights and ambiguities. Interestingly, he notes how Kilminster's closeness to Elias is not explicitly apparent within *Praxis and Method* (1979), but is very much front and centre by the time of his third book (2007) (see Mennell, this volume). An assessment of Kilminster's contribution is then made with reference to his work on the relationship between philosophy and sociology, his clarifications on Marx and critique of *Marxism*, and, most notably for Loyal, his rigorous demonstration of the specificity, power and implications of Elias's unique sociology.

**Stephen Mennell** provides a *laudatio* of Kilminster, which was delivered at the Leeds conference in 2018. Mennell combines personal reflection, humour and a deep knowledge of Kilminster's career in presenting an account that serves as a useful complement to Kilminster's autobiographical reflections. He pays tribute to Kilminster's central role in the preparation and English publication of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias and also to Kilminster the teacher, noting the large number of his former pupils who have gone on to academic careers, which Mennell sees as 'an intellectual legacy in its own right'.

**Kilminster** offers autobiographical reflections on the process of becoming a sociologist as a "self-clarification" in which he foregrounds his debt to others and the processual and intergenerational character of his experiences. Detachment and process are characteristically to the fore here as Kilminster focuses on the 'interplay between experience, far-reaching social and political trends, the expansion of sociology and major national events, and the formation of sociological concepts designed to understand them' that have shaped his development as a sociologist – from his multidisciplinary education at the University of Sussex in the turbulent 1960s onwards. Kilminster's reflections not only underscore the transformation of higher education

and scientific establishments over the last half century, but also spotlight the deeply processual and intergenerational nature of knowledge on human societies, which demands attention be drawn to both psychogenetic and sociogenetic processes.

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## Notes

1. The conference was convened by three of Kilminster's former pupils – John Lever, Ryan Powell and Stephen Vertigans – and was funded by the Norbert Elias Foundation. The conveners wish to state their gratitude for that generous financial support as well as the contributions to the conference from Johnny Connolly, Paddy Dolan, Cath Morgan, Phil Sutton, Paul Watt and Nico Wilterdink. They would also like to thank the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds and the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of Sheffield for their contributions to the event. Videos of the keynote lectures delivered by Marc Joly and Richard Kilminster, as well as Stephen Mennell's *laudatio*, can be accessed via the Norbert Elias Foundation's YouTube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_msMCq1kiurZjR7z57Wvww](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_msMCq1kiurZjR7z57Wvww)

[[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_msMCq1kiurZjR7z57Wvww](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_msMCq1kiurZjR7z57Wvww)].<sup>†</sup>. [#N1-ptri]

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