The Threefold Calling of Sociology

Marc Joly, CNRS

LABORATOIRE PRINTEMPS/UNIVERSITÉ VERSAILLES SAINT-QUENTIN

Preface

It is a real pleasure and a privilege to participate in this tribute to Richard Kilminster. [1][#N1] This paper consists of an illustration of how I was led in my own work to deal with questions of the sociogenesis of sociology and the 'defunctionalisation' of philosophy. While I could not have done anything without Richard Kilminster, I have favoured slightly different approaches, methods and fields of investigation. This is what I will try to explain in the following with reference to what I term sociology's 'threefold calling'.

Introduction

Norbert Elias used to compare scientific work to a torch race:

> We take the torch from the preceding generations, carry it a distance further, and hand it over to the following generation, so that it can go beyond us (Elias 2009 [1977]: 91).

I do not claim to have gone beyond anyone and I personally prefer the metaphor of the relay race: I strongly feel I belong to the same team as Richard Kilminster!

To begin, I must confess that it took me a while to understand Kilminster's principal concepts: 'sociological revolution' and 'post-philosophical sociology'. When I wrote my doctorate on Norbert Elias, more precisely on the French reception of his work, I had taken note that he had broken with Kantian philosophy. I could see that it had meant a lot to him – scientifically and existentially. My thesis, published under the title *Devenir Norbert Elias* (Joly 2012), also has something of an intellectual biography, and therefore I could not avoid this break with Kantian philosophy. I could see that Elias abandoned philosophy and that it was a turning-point for him – but I was unable to explain exactly why.

I had read Kilminster's books and I had been struck by his idea that 'Elias's rebellion against the neo-Kantians took him in the direction of integrating social and psychic processes in an empirical enterprise which he closely identified with the rising discipline of sociology' (Kilminster 2007: 10). Nevertheless, I am not sure that I fully understood at that time what it meant to conceive of the integration of social and psychic processes as an empirical enterprise *and* to identify such an enterprise with sociology. Why was sociology the theoretical-empirical science *par excellence* in relation to the integration of social and psychic processes? And why could this science be regarded as a 'post-philosophical' discipline – maybe as the last 'post-philosophical' discipline in terms of it being the latest to emerge – and, as such, as the symbol of the end of philosophy's cognitive function or duty? Thanks to Kilminster's body of work in particular, I could frame the questions in

these terms, and I could give some answers. But I repeat: fundamentally, I did not understand what it was all about.

That is probably the reason why I decided after my doctoral research and its subsequent publication to study the relationship between psychology and sociology in the German and French intellectual fields between the 1860s and the 1930s. More specifically, my aim was to reconstruct the development of those two fields during this period from the point of view of the debates raised by the affirmation of a scientific psychology – a physiological and experimental psychology – and a scientific sociology – a sociological sociology.

My main assumption was that, with the advent of the fundamental concepts of psychology and sociology, Europe underwent, between 1880 and 1910 or so, a second 'pivotal period' (*Sattelzeit*) that followed the one identified by Reinhart Koselleck between 1750 and 1850. But while this first one was marked by a futurist-normative reorientation of political and social concepts, the latter was characterised by a reality-congruent and non-normative reorientation of new words and concepts that were meant to convey the dynamic nature of human beings and the kind of groups they form. The relation between these two 'conceptual revolutions' and the transformations of the structures of European societies as a whole was the background of my study.

I studied historical semantics during a two-year stay in Germany. I read a large amount of printed documents (journals, books, and so on). I started to look into the journal *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie* ("Quarterly Journal for Scientific Philosophy"), founded by Richard Avenarius in 1877 and edited from 1899 to 1916 by Paul Barth, a professor of philosophy and moral education at the University of Leipzig, and rapporteur for Germany at the First Congress for the Teaching of Social Sciences in Paris in 1900. He also authored a very influential book: *Die Philosophie der Geschichte als Soziologie* ("The Philosophy of History as Sociology"). It was on his initiative that, in 1902, the journal changed its name to *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie und Soziologie*, thus becoming the first German journal to include the word *Soziologie* in its title. My idea was to examine it through a systematic comparison with *La Revue philosophique* of Théodule Ribot, founded one year earlier (in 1876).

To be quite honest, I stopped this comprehensive work when I thought I had identified the structure of a new conceptual regime – the conceptual regime of human and social sciences. It became apparent that this regime requires us, on the one hand, to distinguish *and* to articulate three dimensions of human existence (the biological, the psychological and the sociological ones), and, on the other hand, to 'domesticate' the dualism (which lies in the individual's consciousness) by questioning in the first place the opposition between the individual and society. There was something new in this regime, something that made it autonomous: the scientific requirement to study and to conceptualize biological, psychical and social processes and structures. And there was something old, or, more exactly, something that marked the transition between the politically structured *Sattelzeit* of modernity analysed by Koselleck and the new ways of thinking: the problem of the relationship between the individual and society.

In my book *La Révolution sociologique* (Joly 2017), I illustrated this twofold dimension, first by analysing Gabriel Tarde's position in the French intellectual field and the reception of his masterpiece, *The Laws of Imitation*, which was published in 1890. And second, I examined the volatile dispute over the epistemological nature of sociology that took place between Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber during the First Conference of the German Society for Sociology in 1910.

The logic of a frame of analysis

Let me now summarise the essence of the model I built very gradually on the basis of my empirical research and which is expounded in my last book on Pierre Bourdieu (Joly 2018). It is as a *fully fledged* social science, *and in so far as social science rounded off a system of human scientific thought that began with the emergence of evolutionary biology*, that sociology is the discipline that has been required both to define a new theory of knowledge and to define a new 'human self-image'.

In other words, sociology has not chosen its 'threefold calling' – that is, to symbolise the rise of the social sciences and to clarify their epistemological and anthropological implications. This theoretical model aims to explain the historical and epistemological conditions that make sociology possible as a discipline. It has been built in opposition to two other models that have been very influential in France since the beginning of the 1990s. This first of these is the theory of sociology as a 'third culture' advocated by Wolf Lepenies in *Between Literature and Science: the Rise of Sociology* (first published in German in 1985 as *Die Drei Kulturen*, before being translated into English in 1988 and into French in 1990). The second is the idea of the social sciences as 'in-between' sciences, which was promoted by Jean-Claude Passeron in *Sociological Reasoning* (first published in 1991 and translated into English in 2013).

To understand the tremendous success of Passeron's book in France, you must penetrate the arcane Parisian academic battles of recent years. I will not detail here the criticism I made of his epistemology in *Pour Bourdieu* (Joly 2018: 253–279). As I explain, it rose to dominance in French social sciences in the 1990s mainly because it emerged as an alternative to Bourdieusian sociology.

By comparison, the success of Lepenies's book was in many respects a European success. It is pretty easy to explain why: it was one of the first books on the history of sociology that was not written from a purely disciplinary and national perspective. Therefore, it looked fresh, elegant and scholarly. Furthermore, it dealt with three countries: France, England and Germany. It is indeed a ground-breaking book. But, for me, its theoretical framework is too impressionistic.

Lepenies seeks to think about the rise of sociology in the context of a so-called great competition between the literary and scientific intellectuals for recognition as the chief analysts of industrial society in the nineteenth century. But this makes it impossible to see, and to properly conceptualize, the rise of one single scientific culture that changed literature – in particular with the emergence of realism and naturalism – *and* the study of human beings. And this makes it impossible to perceive and to theorize the rise of a real counter-culture in the academic field: the culture of 'philosophy'.

Curiously, Lepenies does not justify his use of the notion of culture. Was sociology a third culture, a kind of hybrid of the scientific and literary cultures? And in what sense? Not only is this point not clarified, but also, we cannot exactly identify the scenes where the so-called internecine strife between scientists and literary producers occurred. The contrast is striking between Lepenies and Kilminster, who explains in *The Sociological Revolution* that he takes 'culture to be an ordered pattern of symbols, knowledge, beliefs and ways of thinking and acting characteristic of a definite social group' (Kilminster 1998: 4). He speaks explicitly of 'the culture of philosophers' and emphasizes two of its aspects: the fact that philosophy possesses enormous prestige; and the fact that it is 'a highly verbal activity by its very nature' (Kilminster 1998: 6). He rightly characterizes philosophy as 'a culture of defence' (Kilminster 1998: 19).

In my book *La Révolution sociologique* I tried to demonstrate, contrary to Lepenies, that sociology was not a hybrid of the scientific and literary traditions, but that we must focus upon its double rivalry with psychology (a psychology that turned scientific) and philosophy (philosophy that must stay Kantian in one way or another, but that could not be naively Kantian any more) for understanding its true epistemological significance. Kilminster (1998: 5) writes in his book that:

It is much more straightforward to grasp the nature of the relationship between sociology and other human sciences such as economics, politics or psychology than it is to understand the relationship between sociology and philosophy. In the former cases, we can refer to the different, but related levels or aspects of the total social process upon which each focuses, but sociology and philosophy cannot be related in this way because philosophy does not have an 'object' of inquiry in that sense.

As for me, I would say that it was less difficult to understand the relationship between sociology and philosophy than to understand the specificity of this relationship by comparison with the relationship between sociology and psychology on the one hand, and the relationship between sociology and history (and the other potentially general social sciences) on the other hand. We can therefore differentiate three kinds of relationship as set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Sociology's disciplinary relationships

	Nature of the relationship	**Stake of the competition**
Sociology–Philosophy	Relationship of substitution	Defining the image of humanity and the conditions of possibility of knowledge.
Sociology–Psychology	Relationship of complementarity	Concluding the formation of a coherent conceptual scientific regime that changes the image of humanity and the question of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge.
Sociology–History (Economics, Politics, Anthropology)	Relationship of integration	Establishing an integrated social science (or a general sociology)

The relationship between sociology and philosophy is a relation of substitution in which nothing less than the legitimate definition of humanity's self-image and of the conditions of possibility of knowledge is at stake. The relationship between sociology and psychology is a relation of complementarity in which the following question is at stake: how can the formation of a coherent new scientific conceptual regime that changes the image of humanity and the question of the conditions of possibility of knowledge be achieved? At least, the relationship between sociology and history raises, *par excellence*, issues related to the establishment of an integrated social science.

In my book *La Révolution sociologique*, I focussed on the first two relationships. In my books on Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu, I tried to analyse the third. In hindsight, I find that the most difficult task is to grasp the nature of the relationship between sociology and history – that is to say: a relationship of integration. In practice, a relationship of integration is perhaps somewhat more challenging and, in any case, more ambivalent than a relationship of substitution and a relationship of complementarity. Durkheim thought that history and sociology were destined to become more and more intimate, and said in 1909: 'a day will come when the historical spirit and the sociological spirit will differ only in nuances' (Durkheim 1970 [1909]: 161). We are still waiting!

The fact is that, in France, the discipline of history claimed to be the social science *par excellence*, even before the advent of the Annales School. At the same time, historians have always taken care to distinguish themselves from social scientists. This ambivalence was unbearable for Bourdieu!

That can explain one difference between Kilminster's perspective and mine. Kilminster notes that he established 'the autonomy of sociology developmentally and "social-ontologically"':

> I suggest that the range of social uniformities and regularities upon which sociology focused was an emergent reality *sui generis*, first theorized in its economic manifestations by the early political economists. It was this feature of the emerging area of inquiry which also distinguished sociology from psychology and biology as well as from the discipline of history (Kilminster 1998: xi).

I tried to establish the autonomy of sociology 'developmentally' and – so to speak – 'social-epistemologically'. It is a different sociological point of view. Another difference between Kilminster and myself is that I chose to stress the fact that the core of academic philosophy is Kantian – whereas he chose to focus on its status and on its rhetorical identity. In this first perspective, sociology is a substitute to philosophy as moral anthropology and epistemology, to a philosophy that had a *privileged object*: 'the human mind' – *what s/he can know*, *what s/he should do* and *what s/he may hope* (to phrase it like Kant). Simply put, a non-Kantian philosophy – a philosophy that is not a moral anthropology and that is not seriously epistemological – is a pure verbalism.

Are we all Kantians?

In a way I think, like Gilles Deleuze, that we are all Kantians. But it seems to me that we are all Kantians because the Kantian question of the conditions of the 'apparition' of a phenomenon was destined to be a *pre-physio-psychological* and a *pre-psycho-sociological* question. For Deleuze (1978), this Kantian question in a way superseded the old Platonic and Christian disjunctive couple of appearance/essence. Deleuze suggests that Kant invented 'a radically new understanding of the notion of phenomenon' as apparition and was as such the 'founder of phenomenology' (Deleuze 1978). I think he is right in saying that Kant – even if he maintained 'the disjunctive duality phenomenon/thing in itself' – decisively helped to abandon the image of a subject 'condemned to grasp appearances by virtue of a fragility which is consubstantial with it' and encouraged therefore to 'get out of appearances and reach the essence' (Deleuze 1978).

But Deleuze forgets that the Kantian constitutive subject – a subject that is constitutive of the conditions under what appears to it – did not necessarily need to be a transcendental subject different from the empirical subject. Indeed, it could be an empirical subject theoretically understood as a bio-psychological subject, a psycho-sociological subject, and even – with Jean Piaget – an epistemic subject.

In this respect, Kant was much more than the Christian thinker he is commonly believed to be. What I mean is that he was thinking about a subject freed from original sin and divinely constituted to constitute the conditions of the apparition, 'named the transcendental subject for it is the unity of all the conditions under which something appears ... to each empirical subject' (Deleuze 1978). Where does this transcendental subject come from? We don't know, but it appears that this un-certainty left a little room for God. The Kantian notional system was indeed a 'tremendous machine' – a 'tremendous machine' for saving God!

Deleuze notes in passing, concerning the concept of the 'transcendental', that 'Kant feels the need to forge or to extend a word which only had a very restrained theological use till then' (Deleuze 1978). But he doesn't draw any conclusions. Where do the conditions of the phenomenon's apparition come from? Where do the categories, space and time come from? How come 'everything which appears' does so 'under the conditions of

space and time, and under the conditions of the categories' (Deleuze 1978)? Why make up a non-empirical instance and relate to it the conditions of phenomenon's apparition? How is it possible that human beings can not only orientate themselves in the world, but can also produce an objective knowledge of it?

The fact is that it has become impossible to answer these questions seriously without taking into account the outcomes of research in biology, psychology and/or sociology, or by considering Elias's idea, central in this research, of sequential order. Life, human beings, human societies, the growth of human knowledge at collective and individual levels, and so on, are all *processes*. If you replace the divinely constituted and ineffable subject with the naturally and socially constituted subject, which is no less generic, you no longer have the transcendental subject. But instead you have anatomically modern humans (*homo sapiens*) and members of specific societies – and you could have, between them and probably inevitably from the point of view of cognitive psychology, an epistemic subject. That is, an abstraction that supposes to study how real subjects develop and mature from infancy to adulthood and whose *raison d'être* is to demonstrate that knowledge is a matter of active 'construction' intrinsically linked to transformations from a state into another one, that is to say to a sequential order.

Human beings perceive the world, understand the world, know the world *under certain conditions*. Kant was right on this point. But such conditions are specific to an organism given its internal mechanisms and to a member of a specific society, personally integrated in networks of interdependence and mutual cooperation: one single contingent product of biological evolution and of natural selection.

So we can see that we are all Kantians and, at the same time, we can no longer be Kantians.

Sociology and the end of philosophy?

Nothing prevents someone pretending to touch on general problems of reality, knowledge, time or morality being more general or more normative than science. However, we should remind ourselves, firstly, that it is impossible to say anything serious about these problems without taking into account scientific progress; and secondly, that it is possible to be general and normative – or even very general and very normative – within the borders of science. In that respect, you could appear more normative and more general than science, but it may well be that you are *differently* general and normative than science. So the key question is to understand what kind of intellectual resources and figures of speech you should use in order to be *differently* general and normative from science.

I think this is what Stephen Hawking meant by saying in his book *The Grand Design*: 'Philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics' (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010: 11). He perhaps wanted to say that professional philosophers use some intellectual resources and figures of speech in order to be *differently* general and normative than science, *because* they are not able to understand exactly what scientific specialists do and how they think.

But let us take an example from outside physics: let us take the example of morality. It is possible to show that a certain moral sense is built into our species and that our moral laws come from the societies to which we belong. Like Piaget in his book *The Moral Judgement of Child* (1932), you could also empirically study the change of children's attitude towards the rules of a game, from the sacred subordination to them – which seems to be typical of the six to eight years old – to the understanding of their conventional character – which seems to be true for the eleven to twelve years old. Anyway, you could not say or do anything serious about the problem of morality outside the bio-psycho-sociological regime of general thought of humanity, which is at the same time a regime of pluralistic fact-finding practices concerning humanity.

I greatly admire Kilminster's firm commitment in favour of the theoretical and epistemological autonomy of sociology, and further, his lack of reverence for established hierarchies. Now I can see more clearly how much this helped me in analysing the state of philosophy after the emergence of a system of human scientific thought proper to biological, psychological and sociological sciences. It was as if philosophers must answer the following question: how can such a new conceptual regime, which is indissociable from new practices of inquiry and of knowledge production, be handled? To put the matter in another way: how in this new intellectual context can the idea of transcendence, something like the transcendental subject, in the way Kant did when he tried to face the regime of thought born with Galilean-Newtonian physics, be maintained? And how might we succeed in re-legitimizing philosophy given the emergence of a science that can study the social conditions of the claim of the transcendental? Richard Rorty spilled the beans:

> transcendental arguments seem the only hope for philosophy as an autonomous critical discipline, the only way to say something about human knowledge which is clearly distinguishable from psychophysics on the one hand and from history and the sociology of knowledge on the other (Rorty 1979, 77, cited in Kilminster 1998: 23).

We thus return to the threefold calling of sociology. Sociology enshrines the formation of a conceptual regime that changes the way of seeing and studying humanity. It is the science that must show, with biology and psychology, why and how our mind is able to understand reality; and, more precisely, to construct reality-congruent models of knowledge of the universe, of life and of human societies. And even worse for philosophy, it is the only science that can study the institutions and the practices which root transcendental needs and beliefs.

Let us reverse the perspective: how can one fail to see that, as a social science *par excellence,* sociology is intended to replace philosophy on an anthropological and epistemological level?

Table 2: Sociology's threefold calling

I. Developmentally	I. Developmentally
1. sociology enshrines the formation of a conceptual regime that changes the way to see and to study humanity ('*anthropological calling*')	1. it is as a social science par excellence ('*social science calling*') that sociology …
2. it is as such the science that must show, with biology and psychology, why and how our mind is able to understand reality ('*epistemological calling*')	2. … is intended to replace philosophy on an epistemological level ('*epistemological calling*') …
3. it has become the only science that can study the institutions and the practices which root the transcendental needs and beliefs (i.e. all needs and beliefs) ('*social science calling*')	3. … and on an anthropological level ('*anthropological calling*')

Kilminster's great thesis

To conclude, two points seem well established concerning the question of the relationship between sociology and philosophy. First, scientific disciplines depend on regimes of thought that are different from the regime of thought in which philosophy historically participates in relation to religion and to forms of investigation and reflection that can be described as 'pre-scientific'. Second, the philosophy that continues to exist is an academic and educational discipline and, as such, a peculiar scholarly practice which is characterized by a specific rhetoric and by specific content.

From the perspective of rhetoric, philosophical discourse fully incorporates the constraint of taking into account the fact of science *and* scientific facts, but in such a way that philosophers can situate themselves below or beyond them. It is the constitution of a corpus of great texts and the institution, at their service, of a tradition of de-historicized commentary that allows for this.

If one considers the content of philosophical position-takings, one sees that they draw on two great traditions:

1. The tradition of philosophy of nature, or (in John Schuster's words) the culture of 'natural philosophizing' (the systematic character of which is due to its own cognitive dynamics and to its subordination to theology) (Schuster 2013);

2. The tradition of moral human-centred philosophy (the systematic character of which is also inseparable from its subordination to theology beyond its cognitive dynamics).

Kant helped to redefine these two pillars by postulating a transcendental subject (who can know the physical world) and by associating morality and the idea of duty (this is the categorical imperative). He defined an exceptionally coherent 'philosophical' synthesis of the objective sciences and of the Christian vision of humanity. But after him, the natural sciences of physics having become more and more linked to sophisticated mathematical methods, and the human and social sciences having defined themselves as processual sciences encompassing knowledge of the epistemic subject: what then remains for philosophy? What could be its channels of development? It might be tempting, for example, to argue that the Kantian transcendental subject was nothing more than a poor copy of the empirical subject serving to preserve an apparent scientificity to philosophy at a time when it ceased to bring about any knowledge. Does not the study of the conditions of possibility of human knowledge now belong to biology, psychology and – above all – sociology?

Hence the eternal temptation of a headlong rush into ontology. But it is important to note that the pathways of philosophical epistemology and ontology can be taken indifferently by the use of rhetoric emphasising either what is below things or experience, or what is beyond them. We can add that totality remains the watchword of philosophers, and the free and self-determined subject their constant point of reference. We must finally remember that philosophers still have the ethical card to play.

But you will have understood that I have only developed here Kilminster's great thesis. I think that we can never thank him enough for having presented it so clearly. I therefore leave the last word to him:

> The advent of sociology ... constituted ... a revolution in knowledge, whereby the epistemological, ontological and ethical concerns of European philosophy were gradually absorbed into the new discipline and transformed, thereby leaving philosophers historically defunctionalized. They have responded by creating (within various traditions) their own areas of competences and laying claim to expertise in them (Kilminster 1998: xi)

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Biography

Marc Joly is a Researcher at the CNRS, Laboratoire Printemps/Université Versailles Saint-Quentin (France). His research interests include: the sociology of 'narcissistic perversion', the sociology of personality, epistemology, the history of sociology, and the historical sociology of European integration. His book *Épistémologie et histoire de la sociologie* is about to be published by the CNRS.

Notes

1. A lecture presented at 'The Sociology of Sociology in Long-term Perspective: A conference in honour of Richard Kilminster'. Leeds, 5–6 April 2018. ⚓ [#N1-ptr1]