

On the Process of Becoming a Sociologist: Autobiographical Reflections

Richard Kilminster

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*You come back, wavering shapes, out of the past,
In which you first appeared to clouded eyes
(Goethe, Faust, 1808: 65).*

Introduction

This article is an edited and referenced version of a lecture I delivered at a conference on ‘The Sociology of Sociology in Long-term Perspective: Conference in Honour of Richard Kilminster’, on 5–6 April 2018 at the University of Leeds, organised by John Lever, Ryan Powell and Stephen Vertigans. It was a response to Stephen Mennell’s *Laudatio*, which also appears in this issue. I am very grateful to him and all the participants, as well as Ryan Powell, Barbara Górnicka and Russell Ó Ríagáin, the editors of this Special Issue of *Human Figurations* based upon a selection of the papers given at the conference. The experience of recognition has been profoundly moving and I am very grateful to all of them for making it possible.

Both the conference programme and Stephen Mennell’s *Laudatio* correctly linked me to that part of Elias’s work devoted to the development of a sociological theory of knowledge. I would describe myself as sociologist of knowledge, but only in a certain sense. For me, sociology does not require a philosophical foundation because it historically possesses the capacity to dissolve (not the same thing as resolve) traditional philosophical problems and reframe them sociologically. Since sociology is part of the process that it is describing it is thus self-grounding, consequently sociology and the sociology of knowledge are the same thing (Kilminster 2015).

My aim in what follows is to explain how I became that particular kind of sociologist, and not, say, a structural functionalist, a Weberian, an ethnomethodologist, or a critical theorist, etc. Over a period of years studying and teaching sociology, it gradually became clear to me that sociology is not a game, nor simply a career, but a vocation, an ultimate human obligation. It is a single-minded devotion to the task of helping human beings to understand the relations they were compelled to make with each other as part of the continuing survival of the human species. I will try to explain how this lofty secular mission gradually formed in my mind, shaped partly by my teachers but very importantly also by the various social experiences and events of which I was a part and from which I learned. ‘Handing over the torch’ to the next generation is central that commitment (see Gabriel and Mennell 2011:5–10).

Norbert Elias (2008 [1986]: 264–66) remarked that, as a result of the ‘permissive’ revolution by young people of my generation in the 1960s and 1970s, the chain of generations [1][#N1] has been broken or at least loosened. One outcome of this has been an ‘overgrown individualism’ that encourages us to treat personal achievements as if they were not dependent upon others, but rather exist in isolation. My aim is to resist this narcissistic tendency as far as I can by emphasising my connections with great sociological thinkers past and present, as

well as with those social developments. I will focus on the three universities, Essex, Leicester and Leeds at which I have studied, researched and taught. Whilst these experiences were my own and a consequence of various institutional choices and theoretical commitments that I made, the sequence and substance of those preferences were not entirely a matter of chance. It was a long process of learning in which historical research combined with my own experiences to reveal to me, amongst other things, the vital role sociology can play in combatting various forms of disorientation which can contribute to catastrophic failures in practice.

One lingering consequence of the generational fault line has been that many people have come to believe that they can achieve fulfilment and meaning in their lives as individuals in the here-and-now, disregarding the lessons of the past. This form of forgetfulness is mirrored in the sociological profession at the time of writing, with the pursuit of short-term 'impact' research and a strong media profile, driven by funding imperatives (Gabriel and Mennell 2011: 18–19). Shilling and Mellor (2001: 4) warn of 'the widespread amnesia of sociology's heritage' that results from this tendency.

Pursuing the immediately modish as the sole vehicle for individual reputation and prestige means, to state the obvious, that the next generation of sociologists cannot rely with any certainty on the present generation passing something substantive and lasting on to them, which they can then confirm or correct, build on, consolidate and pass on the next one. Without being taken up, the collective cognitive achievements of previous generations could be lost and the next generations condemned to reinvent the wheel over and over again. The sequence of generations in sociology is in danger of collapsing into a series of evanescent cultural firework displays that fill the sky with flashes of colour only to subside, leaving a disheartening blackness until the next display is ignited, *ad infinitum*.

My recollections should not be taken as me simply luxuriating in the wisdom of hindsight, but rather should be seen for what they are: a genuine attempt to share a process of self-clarification which has wider implications. As Karl Mannheim (1929: 44) has pointed out, this personal process 'occupies a position in a stream of self-clarification, the social source of which is a situation common to the different individuals'. The process of writing this piece has enabled me to raise my understanding of my intellectual development to a higher level of synthesis.

A multi-disciplinary curriculum

I entered the then recently founded University of Essex in 1967 as a mature student to read English, having abandoned a career in local government as an administrative and legal assistant. I graduated from Essex in 1970 with a degree in sociology (major) with English literature (minor). (I moved away from English towards sociology, which I found far more exciting, for reasons I will mention later.) The declared objective of the Essex degree programmes was to break down the pedagogic barriers between the traditional disciplines, an ambition it shared with some of the other seven new universities established in the 1960s. At Essex, by design, departments were relatively few but very large, each with several professors, large numbers of postgraduate students and grouped into schools – in my case the School of Comparative Studies. The departments associated with this School were Sociology, Politics, Philosophy, Literature, Social History and the History of Art and Architecture; as well as Russian, Portuguese and Spanish. The latter two languages were taught with a strong Latin American emphasis, which kindled my interest in the region and drew me later to Mexico to teach English for a year.

There was a Common First Year for all students entering the School whatever their intended choice of degree subject. In my first year, I had lectures (and accompanying tutorials) from lecturers in most of those disciplines. Right from the start the teaching was multi-disciplinary within the Schools. In Comparative

Studies, there was a lecture every day by a specialist as part of an ambitious introductory historical course tracing political, philosophical and cultural trends from the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth.

In the eighteenth-century theme, which centred on the Enlightenment, lecture topics included the French Revolution, Immanuel Kant, Herder's philosophy of history, Adam Smith, Diderot, and the French utopian architects Boulée and Ledoux. Accompanying tutorials included Hume's philosophy, the poetry of William Blake, Goya's paintings and the political theory of John Locke. Later themes covered socialism, Marxism, *fin de siècle* modernism in the arts, 'stream of consciousness' novels, free verse, Cubism, the Russian Revolution, Fascism, Marxism, the Bauhaus, Freud and much more, all taught in the same comprehensive way. I hope these scant references to names, styles and cultural trends have conveyed at least some idea of the intellectual riches of this course.

Sociologically speaking, society was assumed to be an interconnected whole, developing on and moving in various dimensions, including the political, artistic, cultural and economic. The broadly Marxian perspective of many lectures reflected the *Zeitgeist*. This perspective was implicitly presented as the most comprehensive social scientific framework available for understanding the driving forces behind the social and cultural processes being presented. In the last lecture of the course entitled 'Testing the Marxian hypothesis', the French political scientist Professor Jean Blondel gave as balanced and careful an evaluation of this proposition as he could in the context of a highly politicised student audience.

This ambitious, multi-disciplinary outline of two hundred years of European society and culture left in my mind two lasting problem areas for further investigation. Firstly, its delivery came from lecturers drawn from a loose aggregate of disciplines which stood side-by-side, which was an arrangement not conducive to building a synthesis. Students were left to join up the dots themselves. I was very inspired by the theoretical challenge of connecting up all the threads woven into this rich social and cultural tapestry in order to understand the overall patterning of social development as a whole, for which Marxism at least provided a laudably developmental starting point. It was an indicative, but clearly partial, starting point. The comprehensive orientation of the course more generally encouraged holistic, 'totality' thinking and the longer view, drawing me towards philosophers of history such as Herder, Vico, Hegel and Comte, and later to the developmental sociology of Norbert Elias. It was these exciting theoretical challenges in particular which drew me more and more towards sociology and away from English, which, at this time, was not the theoretically sophisticated and gender aware discipline it is today.

Secondly, the unique style, idiom and selective content of the various lectures coming from the different independent disciplines left a lasting impression. It seems that the very attempt to integrate them had created conditions conducive to further disciplinary competition, which ironically reinforced their individual institutional tenacity. This independence was obvious in the disciplinary character of each lecture or group of lectures given by one person, say a philosopher, sociologist, social anthropologist or historian. [2],[#N2]. This experience alerted me to academic professions, specialisms and establishments, although I could not have put it that way at the time.

Sociology and philosophy

The single honours syllabus in sociology (which began in the second year) was fairly orthodox for the time, derived largely from the US. There were core courses in theory, modern industrial societies and research methods. The structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons as a paradigm for the discipline was very much to the fore. His main followers on the reading list included Robert K. Merton, Neil Smelser, Edward Shils, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore. Symbolic interactionism as a micro approach was represented by

George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman. This period was also the heyday of the philosophy of science and analytic philosophy, both of which fed off the expansion of sociology and pervaded the field. These philosophers brought their logical skills to bear on the theory and research procedures of the burgeoning discipline; and sociologists looked to the prestigious philosophers for guidance and clarification, automatically deferring to their authority. The 1960s and 1970s period was the high tide of scientism or positivism in sociology as expanding departments across the country sought (modelled on the US) to enhance their professional standing by employing natural-science based models of scientific method endorsed by philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Carl Hempel and Ernest Nagel. Settling the methodological underpinnings of sociological research was widely regarded as central to the building of a reputable and successful sociology (Tudor 1982: ix).

At Essex, a version of logical empiricism [3],[#N3] embodying the hypothetico-deductive (H-D) research model seemed to be favoured. This template specified one model for all sciences (including sociology) as the ideal, in which hypotheses derived from laws were tested and priority given to rigorous causal explanations. Encouraged by my supervisor, I attempted in my undergraduate dissertation in the sociology of religion to test various theories that tried to explain how and why sects break away from established churches. I recall struggling to find causal mechanisms in prose accounts of sect formation and development that I could boil down into diagrams consisting of arrows representing postulated causal directions of variables, sometimes bifurcating into different outcomes. In retrospect, it was an absurd, formalistic exercise that was pressed upon me by well-meaning tutors who were faithfully following what was the rarely questioned methodology at the time.

Analytic philosophy [4],[#N4] and its close relative linguistic philosophy, played a central role in the sociology curriculum, too, in the form of a weighty compulsory course taught by Alasdair MacIntyre stretching over three terms entitled, 'The Philosophy of Social Science'. The prescribed texts were Arthur C. Danto, *Analytic Philosophy of History* (1968), Karl Popper, *Poverty of Historicism* (1961) and Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958). The course explored a set of questions surrounding the nature of human action that were said to arise from the research and findings of sociologists: can human action be predicted? If so, does that not imply that people are not free to act as they please based on personal reasons? Can these reasons therefore be construed as causes having measurable effects? If not, then action cannot be wholly predicted and the claim that sociology is a strictly causal, scientific discipline collapses. Later, as a postgraduate student, I came to realise that these issues were only problematic if one was following a logical empiricist model of science for sociology in the first place and if one was also making individualistic assumptions of one kind or another. It was hard at the time, though, to see why these questions were given such thorough and intense attention.

These logical disputes constituted my first encounter with philosophy in the academy and it was a bewildering experience. I felt privileged and excited to be reading this prestigious subject, something that I had long wanted to study in depth. But I found the subject matter dry and tedious and was disillusioned by the destructiveness of its results. This disenchantment preceded my later encounter with Elias, Mannheim, and the sociology of knowledge, in which the claim to comprehensive cognitive authority of the prestigious philosophers was questioned from a sociological point of view. The philosophers I encountered employed a particular kind of studied precision, both in their writing style as well as in their verbal dexterity in debate. They had a professional code that informed the way in which they proceeded (Scharfstein 1980: 394–395). The overall aim of the philosophy that MacIntyre and others in this tradition practised seemed to be the detection of disabling or even fatal logical flaws in sociologists' writings or in frameworks of thought. It began to dawn on me, even back then, that the means of rigorous 'clarification' had become an end in itself.

Whole frameworks of thought or major works (say psychoanalysis or Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* or Weber's *Protestant Ethic*) could be dismissed with logical hair-splitting, which distracted from the general conceptions and wider meanings contained in them. Many of us students became quite adept at this kind of analysis, thinking that this was what a philosophically sensitive sociological approach was all about: demolition. This technique became a wrecking ball which we could swing into any edifice of thought. In our own work, we soon learned how to spot a contradiction, a *non sequitur*, or an *ad hominem* argument, category mistakes, essentially contested concepts, circularity, or perhaps discovered the much-prized spotting of the genetic fallacy.

The deployment of this armoury of techniques for its own sake sometimes sank into condescension: MacIntyre had just published an article with the disdainful title, 'Weber at his weakest'. He was also a virtuoso of presentation and showed great rhetorical flair, and could bring together rigour and theatre in one performance. He gave a public lecture in the University in 1969 with the sweeping title, 'Against Existentialism'. At the start he waited for silence, stepped up to the microphone and announced, 'Against existentialism I will advance eleven arguments.' Raising a forefinger he continued, 'Number one.' He then theatrically worked through all of the eleven damaging arguments one at a time, often using *recherché* or witty examples to illustrate his points. It was brilliant and entertaining but amounted to a veritable massacre of this entire tradition and its leading exponents.

Democratisation and anomie

Essex had been consciously established institutionally as a democratic, campus university, the inspiration of the idealistic liberal vice-chancellor, Albert Sloman. In the context of the growing generation gap in the 1960s, this proved to be an innovative move with significant consequences. The new university was to embody a new approach to higher education, where the barriers between staff and students would be significantly reduced to create a unified community of scholars learning together on more or less equal terms. He had advanced this imaginative blueprint in his Reith Lectures, *A University in the Making* in 1963. Controversially, at Essex there was no senior common room or separate facilities for staff and students and no separate students' union building. I thus experienced at first hand a systematic experiment in relaxing in practice the code of social behaviour (clear social distance and formality) associated with the previous generation.

At Essex, professors and lecturers and students were on first name terms and mingled together in the coffee bars, coffee shops and restaurants. This informality was part of a democratising process that was accelerating at that time anyway in the wider society as the rising younger generation of baby boomers was decisively turning its back on the generation that preceded it. It was part of a wider movement in which the balance of power began shifting, not only towards the younger generation, but also towards gay people, women, blacks and other outsider groups, which were in an emancipatory phase (see Wouters 2007; Wouters and Dunning 2019 on 'informalisation'). This was the age of the outsiders. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, it seems that Sloman had sensed which way the wind was blowing. [\[5\] \[#N5\]](#)

However, an unintended consequence of the Essex experiment in this respect was that tension, unease and anxiety were built into social relations in the university from the start. It was palpable. In our daily lives in the university we were struggling to deal with the demands that this abrupt experiment in dehierarchisation entailed, when we were neither psychologically nor culturally fully prepared for the demands it imposed. Without a separate student union building, for example, there was no place where students could go collectively, a place where they could congregate as a generation, as young people in transition from childhood to adult independence. [\[6\] \[#N6\]](#)

At the same time, younger members of staff were similarly affected. Without a senior common room they were unable collectively to mix as a generation with the more established older staff, which hindered the development of master–apprentice or professor–lecturer relations. Together with intense political conflicts that were being played out at the same time, it made the isolated rural setting of the University of Essex at this time an educationally stimulating, but also disconcerting and above all, anomic campus. As a result, some younger staff at Essex and other universities such as the LSE at this time (in the humanities and social sciences in particular) were caught between two stools: staff or student, often resolving the contradiction by spectacular identification with the students during disruptions of universities by student occupations, sometimes resulting in suspensions of activist staff. Which leads into the nature of the Essex Left, which was partly shaped and reinforced by the character of this institution and its setting.

Intimations of overcritique

Essex had its fair share of student occupations, general meetings, wall slogans, and demonstrations in 1968 that typified the experience of many British universities and others across Europe and the US. They continued into the 1970s in various forms. As a mature student of 25, my life experience gave me a certain detachment from both the mainstream younger student body and from the protests themselves. I was deeply affected by the emotional and intellectual upheaval of the protest movement, though my practical participation was minimal and always somewhat low-key. My friends were mainly other mature students, of whom there were many at Essex because the University had a liberal admissions policy that explicitly favoured them.

At Essex, Marxist controversies were the main subjects of social and political discussion, amongst the staff and students equally. This was my first encounter with ‘extra-Parliamentary politics’. The prevailing cast of the Essex Left was libertarian, once described as a ‘loose, anarcho-syndicalist radicalism’ [7][#N7]. There were organised groups of Communists and various Trotskyists, but it was French Marxism imported from Paris that was most influential, in particular the ideas of the Situationist International, known through the writings of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. [8][#N8] The central conviction of the libertarian Left generally – shared by the Situationists – was that you must consciously propose nothing to replace the alienated society. This was not regarded as a cop-out but a good thing. There were to be no social blueprints to be implemented by revolutionary Leninist vanguards, which would only result in further authoritarianism and domination as Stalinism confirmed. The human problems generated by alienation will never be solved by alienated solutions that would only perpetuate the repressive conditions they were intended to supplant.

The Situationists put their faith in the spontaneous grass roots creation of a totally new non-capitalist world by the masses, starting from everyday life itself. ‘Take your life into your own hands’ was an oft-repeated wall slogan. In his influential book, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) Debord railed against the impoverishment of modern social life through its fragmentation into separate domains with a dehumanising culture determined by market logic and exchange values of a commodity economy based on alienated labour on a huge scale. The critique assumed a traditional socialist view that labour was the basic and ennobling feature of human nature, which is being debased because workers’ labour power is exploited in producing objects not their own. Direct experience has been replaced by passive contemplation of social images created by others, reinforced by television. Due to the spectacle, people are only able to discover an illusory unity and cohesion in their world, which cruelly functions to reinforce their isolation and subjugation.

The now familiar Marxian diagnosis claimed that false needs, diversions and various soothing illusions generated by mass culture cut people off from the genuine life they *could* lead if alienated labour and commodity fetishism – which apparently generated this phony reality – were eliminated. ‘True’ fulfilment,

'true' individuality and 'true' freedom would then be possible. Until then, society remained a desolate, oppressive, inhuman treadmill dominated by exchange values: 'Life quantified becomes a measured route-march towards death' (Vaneigem 1967: 48). People are trapped in a prison of repression, from which there is virtually no escape. Various versions of this sweeping nihilism were common currency at Essex. What made the Situationist version so damaging was that it embodied an extreme, quasi-religious view of a fallen humankind lost in and exploited by its own objectified creations, with people leading dead lives in a hyper-alienated, illusory world. There was nothing positive in society whatsoever or, if there was, it functioned to perpetuate domination.

In their scathing denunciations of modern society, the Situationists singled out various institutions, including the bourgeois family unit, which conspired to inculcate a suffocating conformity that ensured a docile workforce and the perpetuation of alienation. Students were particularly susceptible to this part of the critique because it openly accused them of being subservient to this form of social control and uncritical of the values of the system, the higher echelons of which they were being prepared for. The guilt that would have been generated in some students by the suggestion that they were being socially and educationally groomed for privilege in a drastically unjust, unfree, empty and even inhuman society cannot be overestimated. There was a lot at stake for those who came to believe that they had seen through these illusions and some gave up everything in the urgent pursuit of a new world.

It is interesting that, after 1968, Debord came to the same conclusion that many revolutionaries did. There was no hope for the spontaneous consciousness of the proletariat to emerge because they had been completely seduced by the spectacle and were locked into consumerism as a way of life. An insatiable consumer desire now pervades every nook and corner of society from politics to intimate relations and has taken social control to a new level of total integration. [9],[#N9]. Like many others, Debord and his collaborators therefore looked around in society for other groups who might become 'contributors to a spreading general insubordination' (cited by Jappe 1999: 103). He redefined the proletariat as anyone who is dispossessed in some way: including struggles of black people, women, children, gay people, workers in Soviet Union, students and younger people and other outsiders as well as everyone in a workplace which is hierarchical. Together, this list constituted virtually the entire population who were all seen as 'in struggles against alienation'. The vagueness of these abstract and under-theorised concepts was glossed over, although the sweeping social criticisms continued unabated.

'There will be an answer, let it be' (Beatles)

Those vivid experiences at Essex raised various questions about politics, knowledge, ideology and partisanship that demanded answers, which spurred my further research in a number of directions. It prompted me to study the genesis of this Western Marxian literature that was having such an impact. It seemed important to do this since claims were being made of the superior cognitive power of praxis over sociology, which I felt needed further investigation.

The Parisian Marxist critique drew in particular on the more magical, transcendent side of Georg Lukács's then untranslated tour de force *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923, which had already been translated into French in 1960 (Kilminster 1979: 78–79). It posited momentous, even miraculous, implications of the proletariat's projected victory, which would overturn the alienated objectivity generated by commodity fetishism, enabling people to see the world aright and become masters of their fate not its slaves. There was something captivating in statements of Lukács about the epistemological implications of proletarian class consciousness, one of which I mentioned before to the effect that the imputed consciousness of the proletariat

existed on higher scientific plane. He also argued that, as the class becomes aware of itself, 'the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object' (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 178). An English translation was published in 1971.

At this time at Essex, the discipline of sociology was mocked in some leftist circles as a farcical and empty classification of the reified surface of a commodity society soon to be overturned. It was the inauthentic, oppressive discipline *par excellence*. It assumes, feeds off and perpetuates, human alienation. This viewpoint was a challenge to the autonomy and credibility of sociology that I had to come to terms with, not the least because the authority of sociology, the main subject of my degree, was at stake. However, even with my limited grasp of the discipline, I doubted that all of sociology was as feeble as we were led to believe, although I did find that a good deal of American sociology was rather abstract. Also, sociology at its best competed with Marxism for the prize of understanding society as a developing whole.

After Essex, I set myself the task of investigating the genesis of Marx's work and the relationship between Marxism and sociology, which I did in subsequent postgraduate research, starting in my University of Leicester master's and culminating in my book *Praxis and Method* (1979), which was based on my PhD thesis, supervised by Zygmunt Bauman. The latter study contains my first formulation of the concept of *overcritique* as the massively overstated, wholly negative evaluation of contemporary society expressing profound hostility, even loathing towards it that I found in the world-view of the libertarian Left. (Less excessive affirmations were present in all versions of Marxism.) The radicals rejected political parties and parliamentary democracy, as well as organised revolutionary socialist groups of any kind as alienated solutions doomed to reproduce domination. They did not allow themselves to take seriously a rapprochement of classes, so had no alternative but relentless opposition at all costs, thus mirroring the stance found in Marx himself. Against the model of the imperative of some form of proletarian rule to solve all social problems, there could be no politics of compromise in the present as an end in itself, only wholly negative, intransigent opposition (Kilminster 2014; 2019).

This stance left its fervent believers with very few options, not only of how to help to bring about such a thorough-going and fundamental revolution with the minimum of organisation, but also how to achieve a fulfilled life from other pursuits in a society they believed was desolate and empty, and which they profoundly despised. It does not take much acumen to surmise that this dilemma would result in disillusionment, guilt, feelings of powerlessness and rage against a society which was systematically cutting people off from their 'species life' (Feuerbach 1841: 231) as it would have been expressed. It is significant that of those accused of planting bombs in London at the trial of the Angry Brigade in the 1970s, three of them were ex-students of the University of Essex (see Carr 2010: 25–44).

Over the next few years of study, I gradually came to the conclusion that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for this form of *disorientation* was a combination of metaphysical, transcendental and teleological hangovers in the work of Marx himself, which had been made explicit and reinforced in the Western Marxist writers, some of whom weaved mystical elements into the framework. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* was a central text in this respect and I devoted an entire section of my doctoral thesis to this book. The tradition perpetuated the alluring idea that unrealised utopia was a 'critical' possibility, which is preserved in the theory itself, even if revolutionary praxis has diverged from its path. It was just a question of kindling it into a flame to produce a wholly new world in practice. In other words, as a conviction the utopia was experienced as 'more real' than the bleak social reality.

This Marxian impetus was so heavily loaded with the romantic hope of the proletariat spearheading the final historical liberation of human beings from their own creations that it blinded activists to the significance of the part played by generational conflict in the unrest of the 1960s. As an explanatory concept, generational

conflict was ruled out as a secondary, superstructural phenomenon that concealed the real and fundamentally decisive class conflict dialectic lying beneath, with the key to understanding this dialectic lying in political economy. This theoretical point had the dispiriting effect of minimising (to the point of denial) in the minds of the young activists the importance of the living and real generational bond that was bound up in the conflict with their parents that many younger people were experiencing to a high degree. Hence, there was no credible source of counter arguments available that could have questioned the belief that the younger generation had to make a *total* break with the previous one in every department, including family loyalty, in the service of something bigger than all of us. If some groups within a generation attempt to 'go it alone', not recognising their debt of continuity with the previous one and their bond with them, the conditions are in place for serious disorientation and disastrous consequences in practice.

Sociology pride: the legacy of Elias at Leicester

I arrived at the University of Leicester in September 1970 to study for an MA in sociology, with all these issues and problems buzzing round in my head. I was asking questions and demanding answers. I found at Leicester an established, redbrick university, very traditional, with discipline-based autonomous departments and curricula, and I experienced it as noticeably more serene than Essex. Although student politics were still lively, compared with the febrile atmosphere of the political hothouse that was the University of Essex, Leicester appeared to be a relatively restrained and placid campus.

At Essex, the status of sociology was highly uncertain, and the discipline beleaguered. At Leicester, on the other hand, the sociology department – established under the intellectual leadership of Norbert Elias, assisted by Illya Neustadt – was also very large like Essex, but possessed a much stronger and confident disciplinary identity and took sociology very seriously. At Leicester, sociology was, so to speak, on the front foot, refusing to submit to the negative image others had of it (philosophical as well as political). As far as I could discern, within this consensus there were nonetheless rationalist followers of Popper and Gellner, Weberians, symbolic interactionists and a few serious orthodox Marxists who appeared to be students or ex-students. Despite the factional conflicts in the department (which were common wherever you went), all the sociologists as a group seemed to be secure in their group identity. The discipline was affirmed with a sense of pride. For me, this unexpected self-confidence was both a revelation and a liberation.

I participated in early 1971 in Norbert Elias's stimulating postgraduate theory seminar, which was organised around the themes of the sociology of knowledge and science, ideology, phenomenological approaches, and values. It was open to all MA and PhD students, and various teaching assistants and visitors attended from time to time. This seminar helped me to understand that sociology was not only reputable and defensible but also of great human significance. The passion that many people reserve for religious or political convictions, Elias had seemingly channelled into a commitment to a particular kind of detached, developmental, sociological psychology embodying scientific values and a long-term orientation. For him, sociology was a vocation, a lifetime commitment. [\[10\]\[#N10\]](#) He seemed very sure of what he was doing. I was also immediately struck by his warmth, humour and, particularly, his informality. He was not preoccupied in the slightest with rank or with the trappings of status, a feature of his character that many people of my generation found very congenial. He effortlessly bridged the status and generation gaps.

In one seminar, we compared A. Rupert Hall's book *The Scientific Revolution* (1967) with Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) as contrasting models of scientific growth and change. Elias cited Hall's book approvingly as offering a model of cumulative advance in contrast to the then fashionable relativistic Kuhnian conception of abrupt paradigm change. This was the first time I had heard a serious

developmental critique of Thomas Kuhn, whose famous model of paradigm change in sciences and specialisms was widely influential at the time. I also glimpsed the appealing prospect – which Elias suggested – that Marx could profitably be separated from Marxism, where his ideas had become ideologically frozen. This could be done whilst at the same time acknowledging Marx's seminal appreciation of the structured nature of economic power.

In the light of the Marxism-versus-sociology controversy of the time, this highly original approach seemed to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. That is, turning away from Marxism as an ideology without throwing out baby Karl himself with the bathwater. The title of my MA thesis, 'The Social-Psychological Foundations of Marxism' has a Leicester feel about it. I focussed on the Hegel-Feuerbach-Marx constellation from the point of view of individual and society, tentatively beginning to work with the challenging distinction between the ideas of Marx himself and their ideological systematisation as varieties of Marxism. The dissertation was also my first serious foray into Hegelian thought.

The seminar kindled my interest in the sociology of knowledge, particularly the German tradition, to the significance of which I had already been alerted by Herminio Martins, who taught me at Essex. In Elias, I had by chance discovered its living embodiment and innovative continuation. At the time, I had no inkling of the depth of his immersion in the *Wissensoziologie* with Karl Mannheim in Heidelberg and Frankfurt between the wars, nor his battles with his neo-Kantian doctoral supervisor Richard Hönigswald, nor his then unknown debts to the wave of criticism of the Cartesian ego headed by existentialists and fundamental ontologists, all of which were the subject of extensive research I undertook in the years that followed (see Kilminster 1998: Part I; 2007).

In the course of the seminars, Elias expounded a new and longer-term perspective on the question of the relationship of philosophy and sociology, which went beyond mere aversion to the analytic mode. It transposed the problem onto a wholly different sociological level. The origins, status, content and fate of philosophy as a discipline and as a profession was an integral and legitimate part of the sociology of knowledge. He persuasively argued that with the rise of sociology, philosophers have become as a matter of fact, historically defunctionalised. Hard though this is for many people to take, I think that in broad outline this thesis can be empirically demonstrated. After Leicester, I began the process of doing that, in the spirit of a sociology of philosophy as opposed to a philosophy of sociology, to invert the customary usage.

Elias's contention could only be sustained, I discovered, by showing in detail how this had occurred. I also took into account some of the philosophical schools neglected by Elias because he thought reading them was in principle a waste of time. I sought to show how far sociologists have acquiesced in philosophers' distinctions, categories and their stipulations as to the division of labour between sociology and philosophy. Also, one actually had to read the core philosophers in order to demonstrate these conclusions. From my own reading in philosophy and further research, I found Elias's interpretation of its nature and fate to be largely vindicated, with one or two exceptions where philosophers have come within a whisker of sociology. Also, many were well aware of the equivocation and lack of consensus and direction in the discipline, which were widely lamented. Some, too, had conceded so much to the sociologists that they became very close to arguing themselves out of a job. In a word, I discovered also that some philosophers were more open to sociology than others.

As the 1970s and 1980s went on, both as a postgrad and a lecturer teaching theory courses, I was increasingly reading more and more 'Continental' philosophy as it became known, which was flooding into British sociology as it expanded. It became a necessity to delve more deeply into European social thought for two reasons. Firstly, it was obvious that many of the founders of the discipline were trained in philosophy and that all of them were either inspired by, rebelled against or, at the very least, were influenced by their teachers.

Their relationship to philosophy was basic to the understanding their work. Secondly, during sociology's 'war of the schools' sociologists were more and more seeking inspiration from the major European philosophers, so there was pressure to do likewise in order to keep abreast of developments (Kilminster 1998: 145–172). Initially, it was the sociologists, not the philosophers, who mainly brought into intellectual debate on a wide scale in Britain the work of philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Western Marxists, including Korsch, Lukács and the Frankfurt School.

I was gradually able to develop a fuller picture of sociology's historical relationship to philosophy, taking into account this wider range of philosophy schools beyond the narrow and technical analytic and linguistic traditions. My later research showed that the technical, clarificatory characterisation of the subject matter of philosophy was only one self-definition that philosophers of various stripes had adopted in the twentieth century to claim an autonomous subject matter for their discipline in the face of the dwindling of its area of competence as a consequence of the rise of sociology (Kilminster 1998: 3–26). From all this reading and from direct contact with philosophers themselves in seminars and at conferences, I was also able to build up a sociological model of the 'culture of philosophers' and its significance in the emergence and development of sociology, the first formulation of which is in Kilminster (1989) and further developed in Kilminster (1998: 5–10).

Sociology as pure theory: the University of Leeds

I arrived back in the UK in September 1972 from Mexico, where I had been travelling and teaching English for a year. I came to commence a PhD under Zygmunt Bauman who had recently been appointed as Professor of Sociology in the newly independent Department of Sociology formed from the splitting up of the School of Social Studies at the University of Leeds. He was a refugee, having been expelled from Warsaw in 1968 in an anti-Semitic purge by a ruling Party looking for scapegoats who were said to be stirring up student unrest. He was very well versed in European philosophy and in orthodox and Western Marxism and I learned much from him about these subjects. He was an erudite, cultured, cosmopolitan intellectual and an accomplished linguist. He created a stimulating intellectual environment, encouraging speculation and research on the borderlines of sociology with social philosophy and the history of ideas.

Bauman advocated a conception of sociology primarily as 'theory', a model he brought with him from Warsaw. There it fulfilled the function for critics of the Party and the regime as a way of doing so in an indirect and academic way. Following his teacher Julian Hochfeld, he saw sociology as inherently politically committed, arguing that 'a non-committal sociology is an impossibility' (cited in Kilminster 2017: 209). Sociology was an activity of 'critical' self-reflection, relativising existing interpretations of the established social reality in the course of the activity of sociology itself. It questioned established institutions in the name of human potentials and possible futures. He preferred a high level of generality and deployed empirical data only selectively and suggestively. Imaginary visions of utopia were somehow to be fed into the social reality, shaping and reshaping it. He formulated this as a mode of theorising which 'knows of no criterion of its own validity except the practical transformation of the historical process', a conception adapted from Gramsci. At this time Bauman was writing extensively on socialism, praxis, culture, structuralism and utopias, and strongly identified with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. He took his distance from the British sociological establishment yet he was inside it and outside of it at the same time.

Bauman took the teaching of sociology very seriously, something we both shared. I never understood at the time why, though, that he had little sympathy for Freud and none for psychoanalysis generally, as a fundamental human science, which was a surprising gap in his otherwise thoroughly humanistic approach.

He had no systematic sociological understanding of the unconscious nor of affective bonding. This cut him off from a source of profound insights into human beings and their emotions. It contrasted with the empirically informed historical sociological psychology I had encountered in Leicester. He did share with the Leicester School, though, a lukewarm attitude towards research methods.

As a result of the events in 1968 and the political tensions of the time, one of the most intractable and pervasive sociological controversies in UK sociology during the 1970s, in which Bauman found himself immersed, was the issue of political partisanship in the social sciences. To reiterate, Marxists made big claims for the superior cognitive power of praxis, the idea that knowing the world whilst changing it existed on a 'higher plane scientifically' (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 163) from passively investigating it in the manner of orthodox classificatory, professional sociology.

Bauman nailed his colours to the mast from early on, strongly censuring in reviews and articles a number of prominent sociologists and sociological schools (including Comte, Durkheim, Mannheim, Parsons, Shils, Goffman, Garfinkel) for having all sold out to versions of sociological 'positivism' that justified the unequal status quo. Their work lacked, in other words, a conception of 'critical knowledge'. Bauman's position was very close to the argument of Max Horkheimer's famous essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory'. Elias was a tricky problem for Bauman in this respect. On the one hand, he praised Elias's work to the skies and lauded him as a major sociologist, but on the other hand Elias, too, ultimately fell at the fence of 'critical knowledge' according to Bauman (1979; replies in Dunning and Mennell 1979 and Kilminster 2004 and 2011).

By the time I started my doctoral research on the concept of praxis in the early 1970s, these debates were well advanced and had become frozen into the seemingly irreconcilable opposition of Marxism *versus* sociology, sometimes referred to as dialectics *versus* positivism. Each side demonised the other from positions along the axes of objectivity versus bias and positivism versus emancipatory science and unfreedom versus freedom. I recall one enthusiastic postgrad declaring in a seminar: 'We are all united in one aim: to smash positivism!'

My encounter with Leicester sociology and Elias's radical sociology of knowledge enabled me to step back a bit in the face of the sometimes fiercely polarised debates. In *Praxis and Method* 1979 (based on my PhD thesis supervised by Bauman) I began the process of thinking my way out of this coercive dualism. The thought was only just beginning to form in my mind from discussions with Elias that it was highly likely that this stark opposition was an expression of social and psychological tensions in the wider society. I held on to this promising insight and began to work towards building a theoretical model of phases to explain the source of the conflict as well as the nature of sociological theory in a given phase, which eventually appeared much later on in *The Sociological Revolution*.

However, in the meantime, I attempted, still in a philosophical mode, to go beyond the Marxism–sociology dualism via a piece of compelling Hegelian argumentation that I derived from *The Science of Logic* (1812: 581). This move would also indicate that I was taking dialectics seriously. I argued against sociology in a Marxist fashion and against Marxism in a sociological fashion, inspired by the Hegelian idea of raising the two oppositions to a higher standpoint, thus preserving the truth in both on another level. I claimed that my inquiry was neither Marxist *nor* 'bourgeois', even though it was both dialectical and sociological. I was making both the Marxists *and* the sociologists dance to their own tunes (Kilminster 1975: 3). My nascent sociology of knowledge perspective was also evident in the way in which I undertook a critique of the deeper presuppositions of Western Marxism *and* modern (Kantian influenced) Parsonian sociology. I exposed the politicised, one-sided and dualistic character of Marx's misleading and politicised critique of Hegel, which was an unusual finding, the implications of which have still not been fully understood. It is clear to me now that *Praxis and Method* was a way-station on the track from a critique of metaphysical hangovers in Marx and

Marxism to a fully-fledged sociological point of view on the development of human knowledge. It provided a sufficiently thorough settling of accounts with Marxism to enable me to move forward into new territory.

Which brings me explicitly to the “Two Frankfurts”, the comparison between them having been implicit in this paper. Between 1930 and 1933, in the same building in Frankfurt, there was what I call “Frankfurt I”, that is, the very well-known Institute for Social Research, widely known as the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Leo Löwenthal, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, etc., associated with the neo-Marxist Critical Theory). There was also the less-known “Frankfurt II”, the Sociology Department of the University of Frankfurt (Karl Mannheim, Norbert Elias, Hans Gerth, Gi Baldamus, Kurt H. Wolff, Adolf Löwe, etc., associated with the sociology of knowledge). There was a relationship of polite distance between the two, although there was some common ground between them. Following Edward Shils’s (1970: 303–305) seminal comparison of Mannheim’s ideas with those of Horkheimer, the two leaders of the schools, it is obvious that Mannheim was more original, with a wide breadth of interests, a vivid grasp of details, a richer theoretical imagination and a keen eye for translating his ideas into empirical research problems. Horkheimer’s ideas, on the other hand, combined a relatively simple Marxian stress on the historical-social and economic context with a basic critique of ‘mass society’ as impersonal and destructive of human individuality. This basic Frankfurt I argument finds telling parallels in the influential Parisian Marxism of the late 1960s–1970s.

Having already by chance met Norbert Elias (from Frankfurt II) in Leicester two years before, it would not be too far-fetched to say that when I encountered Bauman’s neo-Marxist Critical Theory in the early 1970s it was, from a theoretical point of view, an encounter with an important part of the approach of Frankfurt I. This link, as I gradually came to realise, underpinned the ‘creative tension’ between Bauman and myself (see Menell 2019 – this volume). On the level of theoretical frameworks as styles of thought, my relationship with Bauman was effectively a reprise of the long-standing distance between representatives of these two great theoretical schools. In my article ‘The Dawn of Detachment’ and other recent work (Kilminster 2014; 2017) I trace the origins of this bifurcation back to the 1840s when the development of a science of society resulted in a parting of the ways to form the partisan-metaphysical and non-partisan-scientific tracks, epitomised by Karl Marx and Lorenz von Stein.

Concluding remarks

As I mentioned at the beginning, in this account I have tried to go beyond merely revelling in hindsight for its own sake by working in a more detached fashion with the idea of self-clarification as a social process. My focus has been on the interplay between people’s experiences, including my own, of far-reaching social and political trends, the expansion of sociology and major national events, and the formation of sociological concepts designed to understand them. I am aware, though, that a number of kites have been flown in this memoir and many questions have been asked but not always answered. It is better to leave questions unanswered than to pretend to have answered them.

What does stand out in these reflections, though, is the generational dimension. Each generation faces and tries to solve the social, political and personal problems peculiar to its experience. The well-known general individualisation trend of modern societies was intensified by a break (or at least a loosening) of the chain of generations which occurred in the 1960s. The sensibility of the post-war generation manifested itself amongst younger people spread across various outsider groups (people of colour, women, students, gay people, etc.), thus producing the age of rebellious outsiders who were experimenting with life-styles and making demands. My experience of observing the unfortunate consequences of some of the political excesses partly triggered by this sensibility suggested that the concepts of *overcritique* and *disorientation* are needed to help us to

understand how some younger people had reached a desperate conclusion: that there was nothing whatsoever that was truly life-affirming about contemporary consumer society and true fulfilment in any department was unattainable until the entire social order was overturned root and branch with the minimum of organisation.

It is an intriguing paradox that in the 1960s and 1970s, whilst the younger generation of baby boomers was decisively turning its back on the ideas, principles, values, tastes and behavioural codes of their parents' generation, at the same time they undertook a challenging task. That was, the complex and dedicated labour of saving from historical oblivion the work of the exiled Weimar sociologists and social philosophers of the earlier generation, including Mannheim, Elias, Adorno and Horkheimer and others. This project was a counter-movement to the general 'feeling for life' of the time. It was this research which vitally corrected for the widespread amnesia of sociology's heritage in general and in relation to Frankfurt II and the sociology of knowledge in particular. In the massive expansion of sociology in the 1960s and 1970s, the discipline became crowded with competing sociological theories, frameworks and paradigms. The boldness of Frankfurt II helped me to tackle the vexed problem of sorting the wheat from the chaff. In that spirit, I employed the terms *parasociology* (for example Lévi-Strauss; Foucault) and *protosociology* (Schutz; Berger and Luckmann) as terms which orientate us in the task of distinguishing genuine innovations in theoretical sociology from the dead-ends and rehashes of ground already gained (Kilminster 1998: 176–177).

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Notes

1. I have focussed in this paper mainly on generational processes; those sequences were of course intertwined with the expansion and institutionalisation of sociology, individualisation and psychologisation, industrial conflict and the geopolitics of the Cold War (Kilminster 1998: 145–172).
[↕ \[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. One incident in particular brought home to me the reality of disciplinary identification. In in my second year reading sociology, I submitted an assessed essay on a question about the effects of the American Civil War on the wages of the rural workforce in the South, set by an economic historian as part of a short course on North American history and society. Quite reasonably, I was criticised for failing to discuss sufficiently the detailed empirical studies by historians on the topic. Hence, she marked the essay down for relying too much on wider sociological interpretations of the period as one in which a basic

shift in the basic power structure of the US was under way (I had drawn in particular on Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* 1967). However, in her comments she ventured the telling historians' censure that I was 'cleverly floating generalisations'. ♣. [#N2-ptr1]

3. One dissenting voice against the suitability of logical empiricism as a foundation for sociological method at the University of Essex at the time was my tutor Hermínio Martins (see Martins 1972, 1974; Garcia 2019) whose stimulating lectures I also attended. In the US in particular, status competition from the economists and psychologists in the academy drove sociologists to put a great deal of effort into making sociology scientific on the lines of the natural sciences, particularly physics, drawing on models derived from philosophers. Hermínio once told me that at the start of a seminar in Harvard that he attended in the late 1960s, the speaker, Marion Levy, in presenting a general theory of modernisation modestly announced: 'I am Newton'. ♣. [#N3-ptr1]
4. By this term I am referring to the particular kind of technical, logical analysis that flourished in Anglophone philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s. It overlaps with linguistic philosophy, upon which Ernest Gellner focussed in his celebrated book *Words and Things* (1959). Both schools are committed to philosophy as mainly a technical, conceptual and clarificatory exercise. I discuss this style of philosophising and many others in the context of philosophers' self-definitions of the subject's area of competence in Kilminster, 1998: 1–26. ♣. [#N4-ptr1]
5. The reference is to a famous line in Bob Dylan's song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*: 'You don't need a weather man/ To know which way the wind blows'. ♣. [#N5-ptr1]
6. I am grateful to Tim Bickerstaffe for this insight. ♣. [#N6-ptr1]
7. This description was attributed to an Essex student activist, Raphael Halberstadt, in an article by the *Guardian* journalist Dennis Barker which appeared in the newspaper on 21 May 1968. Halberstadt was one of three students who had been suspended earlier in the month after a political demonstration at a lecture given to the Chemical Society by a visiting speaker from the Chemical Defence Experimental Establishment at Porton Down. ♣. [#N7-ptr1]
8. From the growing literature on the Situationists, the books by Anselm Jappe (1999) and Ken Knabb (2006) stand out as reliable guides to the group's history, main texts and key ideas, which can be abstruse and are often misunderstood. ♣. [#N8-ptr1]
9. It is interesting to note that because they shared certain Marxian assumptions, Debord's argument about consumerism anticipated by nearly 40 years Zygmunt Bauman's idea, elaborated in his 'Liquid' series of books in the early 2000s, that the only thing that counts in society now is access to the colossal edifice of consumption that has been transformed into a society-wide, life-defining form of total social control. (For a sociological appraisal of this idea, see Kilminster 2017.) ♣. [#N9-ptr1]
10. I emphasised the nature of Elias's total commitment to the vocation of sociology throughout my book on Elias (Kilminster 2007). I also included a succinct summary of this defining characteristic in the introduction to my article, 'The two tracks' etc. (Kilminster 2014). ♣. [#N10-ptr1]

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