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Disassembling the System

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This essay brings to a formal close SERRC's review symposium on my book *Science as Social Existence: Heidegger and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge* (Open Book Publishers, 2017). All told, four reviewers stepped forward: Raphael Sassower (2018); Pablo Schyfter (2018); Paolo Palladino (2018); and Adam Riggio (2018); listed here in the order in which their reviews have appeared. My thanks to them for their thoughtful and often spirited engagement with my book.

I have already responded to Sassower and Schyfter separately (Kochan 2018a & 2018b), so my main task here will be to respond to Palladino and Riggio. My thanks go, as well, to Eric Kerr, who has organised this symposium.

Why Bother Being Epochal?

I coulda been a contender!

I coulda been somebody...

– Marlon Brando as Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (1954)

This symposium was kicked off last May by Raphael Sassower (2018). Six months out, Adam Riggio has now brought up the rear, rounding out the reviewers' side by crystallising Sassower's initial criticism of *Science as Social Existence* into two words: 'Why bother?' (Riggio 2018, 53).

As a question directed at me – 'Why bother writing *Science as Social Existence*?' – the answer is easy: because I felt like it. It was a joy (in a weirdly afflicted way) to write the book, and a joy to see it published. That the SERRC books editor then offered to organise a book symposium was a wonderful surprise, outstripping my expectations.

On the other hand, as a question directed at potential readers – 'Why bother reading *Science as Social Existence*?' – the answer is more difficult to give, because, at the end of the day, it is not mine to give. I am sure that, had I tried to predict and pursue the fashions of the academic marketplace, I would have ended up feeling miserable. By my reckoning, it was better to write from a place of joy, and give a few readers the best of what I have, than to chase popular demand, and deliver something fashionable but personally hollow. Luckily, my wonderful publisher is not in the business of making money.

It is fortuitous that one symposiast, Paolo Palladino, has already answered the second question for me. After summarising his appreciation for several aspects of *Science as Social Existence*, Palladino concludes: 'All this seems to me a wholly satisfactory answer to Sassower's question' (Palladino 2018, 43).

Predictably, some tough guys will scoff at joy. Either because they already have so much they cannot see the need for more, or because they have so little they cannot abide seeing it in others. Riggio has shared with us his insights about disciplinarity, culled from his 'decade of work as a professional-level philosopher' (Riggio 2018, 54). My own experience suggests that

academia could use more joy. ‘Why bother?’ is really a bureaucrat’s question, asked by hiring, funding, and promotions committees. Perhaps better questions could be asked.

Presumably Riggio would not begrudge me my joy, but his interests do lie elsewhere. He wants me to be ‘epochal’ (Riggio 2018, 58). According to him, had I not allegedly hobbled myself with disciplinarity, then, ‘[i]nstead of writing about Martin Heidegger and David Bloor, he [being *me*] could have written something with the potential to leave him [being *me*] mentioned in the same breath as such epochal thinkers. He could have become epochal himself. [...] How about next time, Jeff?’ (Riggio 2018, 58). Wow. That is quite flattering ... I guess. But my answer is: ‘no thanks.’ Not this time, and not the next time either.

But no worries. There is a lot of beautiful space between the dizzying heights of epochal-dom and a one-way ticket to Palookaville.

Who Will Bother to Read *Science as Social Existence*?

Yes, who will bother to read my book? It is still too early to tell, with the data sample still quite small. As far as SERRC goes, the sample is exactly four. Let us start with the first reviewer: why did Sassower read *Science as Social Existence*? I must admit that I am already stumped. Nevertheless, Sassower’s review sparked the symposium that has now followed, and I am warmly grateful to him for that.

The second reviewer is Pablo Schyfter. Why did Schyfter read *Science as Social Existence*? Here the reasons seem more easily accessible, and Riggio’s reflections on disciplinarity can help us to draw them out.

Riggio finds it frustrating that I organised my book as a constructive dialogue between two academic disciplines: Heidegger Studies; and Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK). He laments ‘how vulnerable this makes him [being *me*] to academic attacks’ (Riggio 2018, 53). He offers Sassower’s review as a case in point.

But Riggio might just as well have offered Schyfter’s review. As I note in my response to the latter, Schyfter fashions himself as SSK’s disciplinary gate-keeper, and he tries to paint me as an attempted gate-crasher (Kochan 2018b). His self-appointed goal is to protect the purity of SSK against my perceived infiltration from without. But Schyfter fails to realise that I am already well within the gates, because the boundaries of the discipline are much less precise than he would like us to believe.

This is a point Riggio also fails to realise, and so my separate response to Schyfter may also serve as a response to Riggio’s similar criticisms in respect of my presentation of SSK.

The third reviewer is Palladino, and the why-question has already been answered. He read *Science as Social Existence* because he thought it was interesting: ‘I hope to have conveyed how much I enjoyed thinking about the questions *Science as Social Existence* poses’ (Palladino 2018, 46). Naturally, I am warmly grateful to Palladino as well.

Reviewer number four is Riggio. Why did he read it? He appears to equivocate.

Why All this Bother about Disciplinarity?

On the one hand, Riggio seems to have read the book because it interested him. He starts by saying that *Science as Social Existence* offers a ‘constructive dialogue’ between Heidegger and SSK, that ‘[t]his open-minded approach to problem solving remains sadly rare in academic culture,’ and that ‘such a trans-disciplinary philosophical project is worthwhile and valuable’ (Riggio 2018, 53). Later, he calls my combination of Heidegger and SSK ‘a very valuable experiment,’ as well as ‘brilliantly insightful in how philosophically challenging and creative it is’ (Riggio 2018, 57).

Sorry for laying that on so thick, but it is fun to repeat such stuff. Yet, that is then as far as it goes. Instead of developing one or more of these positive points, Riggio spends the rest of his time focussing on what he perceives to be the negative consequences of my choice to work at a disciplinary level. As we have seen, Riggio laments how vulnerable this allegedly makes me to ‘attacks’ from the likes of Sassower and Schyfter. Apparently he hopes to protect me from such perceived aggression.

I appreciate Riggio’s concern, but I think I have done a good enough job on my own of defending myself against Sassower and Schyfter. I would have rather Riggio had developed his positive points, no doubt also delivering some excellent criticism along the way. For example, he could have helped to make my ostensibly ‘open-minded approach to problem solving’ less rare by more substantially engaging with it and encouraging others to adopt the same approach. I could have benefited from his advice, and I reckon others could have too.

In my view, one of the biggest tragedies of the periodic disciplinary dogmatism one encounters in academia is that it often drives creative minds into a kind of extra-disciplinary exile. And I know how lonely it can be out there. Yet, rather than trying to pull me out there with him, I would have preferred it if Riggio had joined me in here where there is no end of action, not to mention loads of intellectual resources. It helps to keep one’s elbows up, for sure, and certainly also to have engaged and well-positioned allies like Palladino, who is, he emphasises, *not* invested in ‘disciplinary purity’ (Palladino 2018, 41).

Let me make a final, more proximal point before I close this section. One key goal of *Science as Social Existence* is to defend the Edinburgh School’s ‘Strong Programme’ in SSK by removing the School’s vulnerability to sceptical attack (see also Kochan 2018b). Riffing off Riggio, I can now conjecture that the Edinburgh School’s vulnerability arises, in part, from their open-minded approach to problem solving, more specifically, their mixing together of two disciplines: sociology and philosophy.

Yet, the Edinburgh School experiences friction between their philosophical and sociological interests, in the form of a sceptical attack. My diagnosis: they tried to mix sociology with the wrong kind of philosophy. They might have gone for Heideggerian phenomenology. By easing them in this direction, I relieve them of their vulnerability.

Hence I do for the Edinburgh School what Riggio thinks I should have done for *Science as Social Existence*. I release them from the disciplinary friction which led to their vulnerability. However, I do this, not by urging them to abandon disciplinarity altogether, but by nudging them onto a different disciplinary ground. Moreover, I could do this only by embracing the very disciplinarity that Riggio suggests I abandon, that is, only by digging down into the methodological and conceptual clockwork of Heidegger and SSK.

Oh, Bother! – The Conceptual System Returns

One thing I try to do in *Science as Social Existence*, especially in Chapter 7, is to turn methodological attention away from systems and towards subjects. Palladino correctly identifies this as having been motivated by my discontent with ‘perspectives that have increasingly come to dominate science and technology studies’ (Palladino 2018, 45). Indeed, in Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss how these perspectives have often sought to reverse the gains made by earlier SSK practitioners.

My argument is that, by emphasising systems over subjects, contemporary theorists have often suppressed subjectivity as a fundamental explanatory resource. They shift attention from subjects to systems. The emphasis is usually then put on systems of practice, but it could also be on systems of concepts. Either way, the system is primary, the subject secondary.

Palladino agrees with me that the system should not be viewed as more important than the subject (Palladino 2018, 46). Yet, in contrast to me, he sees subject and system as equally primary, as fundamentally co-constitutive. Palladino grounds this difference between us in my alleged equation of subjectivity with Being. He, on the other hand, equates subjectivity with Becoming, with a ‘performative operation’ (Palladino 2018, 45).

I am less inclined to draw such a sharp distinction between Being and Becoming. In my view, Becoming presupposes Being, because Becoming is a change-of-state in Being, in something that already is, that already exists. In *Science as Social Existence*, I write: ‘Grammatically, the phrase “the meaning of being” is similar in structure to the phrase “the thrill of a lifetime.” [...] A lifetime is a historical-existential space wherein thrills can happen. Likewise, being is a historical-existential space wherein meaning can happen,’ that is, a space wherein meaning can come into being, where it can become (Kochan 2017, 54).

The subject, construed as being-in-the-world, is a historical-existential space wherein one finds possibilities for Becoming. Palladino’s ‘performative operation’ presupposes a performer, just as the concept of practice presupposes a practitioner. *What* or *who* a subject is – its meaning or significance – is the result of practice, but *that* a subject is – its existence – is not. A subject may experience itself as an unintelligible tangle of perceptions – as does, perhaps, a newborn baby – slowly acquiring meaning as it stumbles through a world shared with others, actualising or being actualised in accordance with the existential possibilities of its Being (cf. Kochan 2017, 145ff.; see also Kochan 2015a).

A system of practices or of concepts thus presupposes a subjectivity that does the practicing or the conceptualising. Since, following Heidegger, subjectivity is not just being-in-the-world, but also being-with-others, it is a necessarily plural phenomenon. Combined with Heidegger's account of the subject, SSK thus becomes (necessarily but not sufficiently) the sociological study of scientific subjectivity in relation to the world. The primary explanatory resource is now the community of historically interacting subjects, along with the material resources they enrol in those interactions.

The system-centred theorist reifies this inter-subjectivity, turning it into a system, scheme, or network with an agency of its own. The subject is thus subordinated to the power of the system. Combining insights from SSK pioneers Barry Barnes and David Bloor, I argue, instead, that 'the system does not carry us along, we carry it along. We are compelled by the system only insofar as we, collectively, compel one another' (Kochan 2017, 374).

Herein lies the nub of my problem with Riggio's apparently uncritical use of such terms as 'discipline' and 'conceptual scheme.' In *Science as Social Existence*, I introduce Heidegger's existential conception of science as his alternative to the, in his day, dominant account of science as a conceptual scheme (Kochan 2017, 59). In other words, Heidegger attempts to de-reify – to deconstruct – science construed as a conceptual scheme, arguing instead that science is, at its base, an existential phenomenon produced by interacting subjects in the world.

This is how I view Riggio's 'disciplines.' They are no more than historical communities of individuals interacting with one another in the world. The vulnerability Riggio sees in my disciplinarity is not vulnerability to the impersonal power of a system, but to discrete and concrete individuals who, for whatever reason, feel the need to attack. When one is attacked by an amorphous and impersonal 'system,' one may feel overwhelmed and powerless. When one is attacked by one or more fragile fellow humans, the odds look decidedly different.

Those who profit from their social situation will often be invested in the status quo. One effective way for them to protect their investment is to reify their situation, painting it as an impersonal system, in the hands of no one in particular. They thus protect their profits, while obscuring their responsibility. This is why, on the penultimate page of *Science as Social Existence*, I cite Baudelaire, characterising the system-centred theorist as 'a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito' (Kochan 2017, 379).

A Regrettable Absence and Two Allegedly Missed Alternatives

For some readers, the preceding section will have brought to mind Michel Foucault. Palladino regrets that I say (almost) nothing about Foucault (Palladino 2018, 45). I regret it too. While writing *Science as Social Existence*, I was sharply aware of Foucault's potential relevance, but I felt that I was already juggling enough. This is not an excuse, but an admission of weakness. The absence is indeed regrettable.

I have, however, criticised Foucault elsewhere (Kochan 2015b). Or have I? What I criticised was what Edward Said labels an ‘overblown’ and ‘extreme’ use of Foucault (Said 2000/1982, 213). My most immediate concern was Ian Hacking, who is arguably allied with the system-centred theorists I take on in *Science as Social Existence*. Hence, the ‘overblown’ interpretation of Foucault appears to be a tool of my opponents. But perhaps there is another interpretation of Foucault, one that could better serve me? I will leave that for someone else to decide.

My research is now taking me in a different direction. Perspicaciously, Palladino has intuited something of that direction. He takes Sassower’s ‘possibly accidental’ mention of Spinoza, and suggests that a ‘Spinozist monadology’ may offer an alternative approach to some of the topics I address in *Science as Social Existence* (Palladino 2018, 44). Yet one accident follows another: for it was Leibniz, not Spinoza, who introduced a monadology. This wrinkle is, however, an opportune one, as it gives me an excuse to discuss both Spinoza and Leibniz.

Leibniz attempted to solve the problem of mind-body (or subject-object) interaction by arguing for a ‘pre-established harmony’ between the two. The law-governed actions of mind and body track one another in a way preordained by God (*Monadology* §78 [Leibniz 1965, 161]). This pre-ordination takes the shape of a rational plan, a ‘sealed blueprint’ (*A Vindication of God’s Justice* §82 [Leibniz 1965, 133]). Leibniz imagined God as an artisan who stands outside the world, guiding its interior operations according to a rational and universal plan.

Spinoza, in contrast, viewed God as immanent in nature. For him, there is nothing external to nature (*Ethics* I, P18 [Spinoza 1994, 100]). The problem of mind-body interaction is solved because ‘the thinking substance and the extended [i.e., bodily] substance are one and the same’ (*Ethics* II, P7 [Spinoza 1994, 119]). Yet, for Spinoza natural events are also rationally and universally ordered: ‘the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, [...] are always and everywhere the same’ (*Ethics* III, preface [Spinoza 1994, 153]). Here too, then, the world is governed by a rational and universal measure, but one implemented from within rather than from without.

Both Leibniz and Spinoza seem to have viewed nature as a unified whole, a dynamic totality underpinned by a core set of logically consistent principles, a rational plan. They were therefore modern thinkers *à la lettre*. Insofar as Heidegger sought an alternative to modern rationalism, his two modernist predecessors would seem to offer, not different alternatives, but a retreat back into modernity. Yet this may be too quick.

For Heidegger, the rationalistic impulse to grasp the world as a whole, as a ‘world picture,’ a ‘basic blueprint,’ or a unified set of abstract axioms from which all else can be deduced, was a historically contingent impulse, generated and sustained within a specific cultural tradition. He worried that this impulse, were it to gain global hegemony, could squeeze out other, perhaps humanly vital, existential possibilities present both within and outwith the broader European legacy.

Heidegger's own search for alternatives to modernity was decidedly idiosyncratic. In Chapter 7 of *Science as Social Existence*, I discuss his attempt to reconceptualise the 'thing' as a 'four-fold.' Heidegger suggested that the thing be seen as a 'gathering' of earth, sky, gods, and mortals (Kochan 2017, 368ff.).

Here is where Leibniz and, especially, Spinoza may still be relevant. Heidegger's four-fold is an attempt to rethink – in non-modern and non-rationalistic terms – the panpsychism often attributed to Leibniz and Spinoza. This is the doctrine that, to one degree or another, mind is always present in body, that, to some extent or other, subjectivity is always present in the object. Hence, panpsychism may promise an alternative to the modern subject-object split.

Yet, for Heidegger, this promise is only a half-measure, because the frame in which panpsychism unites subject and object is a universal, rationalist one. As I read it, the four-fold attempts to dislodge things from this globalising frame. It is more of a recipe than a blueprint. The precise nature of the four ingredients, as well as the proportions by which they are mixed, may vary from one region to the next. Rather than imposing a uniform blueprint on the world, the four-fold embraces a plurality of potential combinations. A can of Coke may be everywhere the same, but each region will have its own daily bread.

Postcolonial STS: A Path Forward or a Dead End?

Palladino is once again perspicacious in suggesting that the route forward in respect of these issues may lie in anthropology (Palladino 2018, 46). For my part, I have been reading Tim Ingold's phenomenologically inflected work. Ingold draws on Heidegger's conceptualisation of the thing as a 'gathering,' and combines it with insights from the ethnography of animistic Indigenous groups (Ingold 2013, 215). Rejecting 19th-c. European construals of animism – wherein a thing is animated by a spirit that inhabits it – Ingold instead interprets animism as a 'poetics of life' (Ingold 2018, 22).

Animism, as Ingold presents it, seems closer to Heidegger's non-modern phenomenology of existence than it does to Leibniz's and Spinoza's modern panpsychism. Palladino notes a connection between this panpsychism and actor-network theory (ANT), currently a dominant position in science and technology studies (STS) (Palladino 2018, 44). It is worth noting, then, that Ingold explicitly opposes his anthropology of life to ANT, especially as represented in the works of Bruno Latour (e.g., Ingold 2013 & 2011).

Ingold argues that animism – as a poetics of life – 'betters even science in its comprehension of the fullness of existence' (Ingold 2018, 22). I am less inclined to draw such a clean line between science and animism, in particular, and science and indigenous knowledge, more generally. Indeed, I have begun to explore how scientific and indigenous knowledges may sometimes be combined in ways that can respect and strengthen both (Kochan 2018c & 2015b).

In Chapter 7 of *Science as Social Existence*, I introduce Heidegger's distinction between 'enframing' and *poiēsis* as two distinct ways in which things may be experienced (Kochan

2017, 359ff.). These roughly correspond to a modern and a non-modern mode of experience. They also encompass panpsychism and animism, respectively. I argue in *Science as Social Existence* that a system-centred understanding of experience is one in which things are ‘framed’ according to a universal blueprint. In contrast, *poiēsis* embraces pluralism, and thus resists the idea that life can be framed as a system, that it can be fully rationalised and reduced to a core set of concepts or practices.

This returns me to Riggio’s ‘conceptual schemes.’ Picking up Heidegger’s concepts of enframing and *poiēsis*, Riggio treats them both as conceptual systems or ‘frameworks’ (Riggio 2018, 55). As should be clear from the above, I reject this construal. In my view, enframing is a disposition to experience the world as ‘framed.’ *Poiēsis*, in contrast, refuses this disposition. Ingold’s animism, as a poetics of life, might be viewed as a mode of *poiēsis* – an existential openness to a world vibrant with life – rather than as a framework or scheme.

Riggio expresses horror at the way Heidegger’s concept of *poiēsis*, in his only recently published *Black Notebooks*, ‘guides’ one towards anti-Semitism (Riggio 2018, 56f). I have not read the *Black Notebooks*, as I have no stomach for still more of Heidegger’s already well-known anti-Semitic opinions and behaviour. But I do wish that Riggio had provided some specific textual evidence and exegesis, because, based on my own understanding of *poiēsis*, I find it difficult to see how it should ‘guide’ one towards anti-Semitism.

According to Riggio, the *Black Notebooks* are ‘pro-Indigenous and anti-colonial, but also anti-Semitic in equal intensity’ (Riggio 2018, 57). Since, in *Science as Social Existence*, I say nothing about Indigenous knowledge or colonialism, it is fortuitous that Riggio independently introduces these topics in his review, thereby allowing a link-up with Palladino’s suggestion that anthropology may offer a way forward. If I have understood him correctly, Riggio worries that *poiēsis* is a conceptual framework in which pro-Indigenous and anti-Semitic sentiments are logically inseparable.

Since I do not think that *poiēsis* is a conceptual framework, I do not feel the force of Riggio’s worry. However, if he were right, then the obvious response would be to reject *poiēsis* as a tool for Indigenous Studies. This would hardly be a tragedy, since Heidegger has never been an authoritative figure in that field anyway. In any case, the best source for learning about Indigenous peoples is Indigenous people (e.g., Battiste & Henderson 2000; Cajete 2000; Smith 2012; and a book recommended by Riggio, with which I am not yet familiar, Simpson 2017).

But perhaps Riggio worries more deeply that, quite independently of the concept of *poiēsis*, Indigenous Studies may entail anti-Semitism? If this were true, then the consequences would be profound not just for students of Indigenous culture, but, more importantly, for Indigenous peoples themselves. More particularly, but less importantly, it would be a serious blow to those, like myself, who currently work in the emerging field of postcolonial STS (e.g., Harding 2011).

But we have now moved well beyond the boundaries of *Science as Social Existence*. It is a testament to the vital intelligence of my fellow symposiasts that the discussion has stretched much further than the book itself, touching also on broader, often more important, issues. Once again, I thank Raphael Sassower, Pablo Schyfter, Paolo Palladino and Adam Riggio for their vigorous engagement with *Science as Social Existence*. To those readers who have followed our conversation, my heartfelt thanks as well.

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