

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie
= Swiss journal of sociology

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Soziologie

Band: 25 (1999)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Guardians of canonical wisdom : why some of us care for the history of sociology

Autor: Kaesler, Dirk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814098>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 29.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

GUARDIANS OF CANONICAL WISDOM: WHY SOME OF US CARE FOR THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY¹

Dirk Kaesler

Philipps-Universität, Marburg

Having followed with great interest the debate on the history of sociology in this journal I would like to join in, not by commenting the points of view of my respected colleagues but by making my own. I would like to explain why I as a sociologist (still) care for the history of sociology. And why I think that all sociologists should care for the history of their discipline.

We are less than one year away from the year 2000. The world-system is in turmoil and in crisis. The symbolism of 2000 matches the reality. Sociology, some hundred years ago, set out to help human beings to observe, understand, foresee, and solve problems of their societies. Does sociology still serve these aims? And what does dealing with the history of sociology have to do with such aims?

In order to sketch some of my answers to these question it would like to distinguish these five questions:

- (1) What has become of the 19th century programme of the *sciences morales* in relation to the development of academic *sociology* since the turn of this (outgoing) century?
- (2) Why has academic sociology distanced itself from its cause to contribute to a "moral improvement" of society?
- (3) Should academic sociology reclaim the profile of a modern "moral science"?
- (4) What could be the agenda for sociological intellectuals in the 21st century?
- (5) Why is the sociological occupation with the history of sociology essential for the preservation of the intellectual heritage of sociology?

1 This text has been published in a slightly different version in the January 1999 "Newsletter" of the "Research Committee on the History of Sociology". I thank Olivier Tschannen for his invitation to participate in the debate on the history of sociology in this journal.

1. Sociology and the *sciences morales*

Around the year 1850 the international scholarly enterprise called *sciences morales*, *Moralstatistik*, etc. – which meant not much more than the empirical research of *mores*, the manners of people, – was one of the dominant heuristic programmes in the formation of the social sciences. This was the time when the contours of a modern industrialised and capitalistic economy and society in most European and North American nations slowly became visible. To understand these processes that stood behind these changes became one of the major concerns not only of ordinary people, but also of politicians and scholars. The success of the natural sciences during the 19th century led to the assumption that historical and socio-economic developments are governed by a system of laws.

This system of laws had to be found out, and the *sciences morales* promised to offer a clear view of such laws. With the application of quantitative research methods social science became to be regarded as means for coming to grips with these most confusing and disturbing developments that changed the whole world. The usage of the term moral never was very precise and varied from author to author. It never aimed at the development of new norms or morals but rather tried to report and systematise social developments that could be observed. The data of moral statistics covered all human social behaviour, the term Moral was used synonymous with “social”.

It was the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) who has been regarded as founder of these ideas to analyse social facts with the help of mathematical methods. According to him the usage of science lay in the possibility of developing preventive practical-political measures that had to be gained by the empirical study of social conditions. In 1835 the two volumes of his famous *Essai sur l’homme et le développement de ses facultés, ou Essai de Physique sociale* was published, a compendium of most of his quantitative research on all kind of social phenomena. With this Quetelet was searching for “laws” that govern the whole of human societies. He was not so much interested in individual behaviour but rather in “typical” human behaviour. He was searching for general patterns that stood behind the fragmentary complexity of individual behaviour. Quetelet himself tried to reach a level of high abstraction and therefore demanded the analysis of great numbers of cases. If there were laws in social reality, he argued, then the mathematical calculation of statistical probabilities on the basis of the great number would be feasible.

Looking back it can be said that Quetelet had lost a sense of proportion in his strive for social laws. Everything that seemed to show some statistical regularity was treated as social law. Quetelet did not even search for plausible connections between purely statistical phenomena and social reality. The observation of statistical regularities did not proof any laws of human behaviour because Quetelet did not have a theoretical framework.

With the appearance of Auguste Comte's (1798–1857) six volumes of his *Cours de philosophie positive* in 1839–42 which included the programme of his *sociologie* a serious counter-concept to Quetelet's concept of *physique sociale* appeared on the scene of scholarship. Comte also wanted to research society from a natural scientific point of view, against all metaphysical speculation and with a stronghold in the ideas of the Enlightenment.

In many European nations a third development blurred this situation even further: the development and gradual institutionalisation of official statistics organised by state agencies. This development which also took place as of the beginning of the 19th century became relevant for the formation of academic sociology. Quetelet, after having become the director of the Belgian Statistical Commission developed and marketed a model for the organisation of state governed statistics. In Germany, for example, several *Statistische Büros* were founded and became the main organisations for the collection and publication of a growing amount of statistical material.

In the case of Germany, it was the founding figure of German sociology, Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), who successfully fought for a pragmatic combination of social statistics and academic sociology with his own concept of *Soziographie* as his version of empirical social research. For him the pure collection of quantitative social facts was nothing but a method of organising data without any analytical or theoretical value. Empirical social research for him was to combine quantitative data with qualitative dimensions, to distil “living cognition”, *lebende Erkenntnis*, out of the “cemetery of numbers” which he saw in the heaps of statistical material of state official statistics.

2. Sociology and the moral improvement of society

In order to answer the question why academic sociology has distanced itself from this type of *sciences morales*, *Soziographie* and statistics we will have to look very briefly into the historical path our discipline has taken. If one looks at the situation of sociology one hundred years ago one sees the picture of one original concept of sociology regardless of necessary differentiation within national traditions of sociology, such as in France, the United States of America,

in Germany. As the result of some of the main ideas of the Enlightenment 19th century sociology was an exciting and orchestrated intellectual enterprise which comprised many different academic disciplines, generations and national traditions. In the centre of this international and cosmopolitan project “sociology” we may identify two convictions:

On the one hand the belief in science which would help human beings to better understand and explain their world. On the other hand stood the strong belief that academic sociology was to contribute to the moral improvement of society and that the preceding discourses on the “Good Order” of societies, especially those from the realm of theology and philosophy, could and should be replaced by human reason. God as the source of historical development was to be replaced by scientific reason of mankind who took history in their own hands.

It is banal to point to the fact that such ideas were substantially connected to the dramatic changes within societies of Europe and North America, processes we generally label as the beginning of “modernity”. The sociological quest for a “Good Society” tried to understand these processes of change and to find some adequate reactions to them. Regardless of whether such adequate reaction was sought in secular republican education, in social reforms or in the formulation of sociology as a critical enterprise for an intellectual understanding of modernity the basic task of scientific sociology was defined as to identify and diagnose those characteristics that were regarded as determining the “modern” system of society.

It is part of the intellectual heritage in sociology that such enterprise, calling itself “sociology”, began with Auguste Comte to whom we not only owe the name of our discipline but also the legacy of some central ideas that are relevant still today. What then did this French philosopher and mathematician, the founder of “Positivism” and enemy of all metaphysics, have in mind with his project of *sociologie*?

First of all it was to adopt the model of the natural sciences in their exploration of nature to the exploration of society and human beings in society. There was this strong, emphatic belief in science and scholarship in Europe after the French Revolution which is so hard for many of us to understand today, not to mention to share, which stood at the cradle of Western sociology. Sociology was there to scientifically research and understand humans, – like physics was there to analyse and understand nature. The program of Comte was basically the transfer of the model of biology or physics to that of sociology. In the very same way the natural sciences did research those laws that ruled and determined nature, sociology was to research the laws of society, i. e. how societies

functioned. Human societies and humans in societies were, that was the basic belief, as researchable as nature was by biology and physics.

This concept of a Comtean *physique sociale* stood at the starting point of the intellectual project called “sociology”, certainly at the cradle of its original, the French version. This model was based on plenty of preconditions: the orientation on the scientific model of physics, a very special concept of “laws” linked to that model and a somewhat restricted answer to the crucial question: What is the purpose of science? Like the natural sciences who did not pursue research for its own sake alone but to master and control nature, sociology’s task was to control and administer society, and that meant the control of the human beings that formed it.

The task of scientific sociology thus became to predict the behaviour and social action of human beings. As physics, besides trying to understand nature, strove for the possibility of predictions, scientific sociology tried to achieve the same aim. Not only the question why an apple falls from a tree had to be answered, scientific research had to find the laws that govern the apple’s falling. If we have answers to this question we can apply this knowledge to mastering flying objects in general, such as cannon balls, to make them fly the way we want them to cause certain effects.

It was a quite simple program following the device: *Voir pour savoir, savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour prévenir*. First you observe what is happening: apples fall from trees, humans form coalitions. Then you try to explain what is happening by formulating hypotheses which in the end lead to the formulation of laws. On the basis of knowing these laws you try to make predictions of future events: apples will fall because of special conditions, humans will form certain coalitions with a specific probability. And only then prevention becomes possible: the knowledge of the governing rules and their probability makes it possible to take certain measures, such as depositing boxes under the tree so that apples will fall into them, or trying to encourage humans to associate in such a way which is in the interest of society.

According to these ideas a concept of social science was formulated according to which its task was to master and to manipulate society, following the motto of Francis Bacon: *Ipsa scientia potestas est*, knowledge itself is power. The programme of Auguste Comte brought this heritage to the new science of his *sociologie*: its aims were to scientifically observe, describe, analyse and predict the course of the lives of human beings. If out of these scholarly efforts predictions are made that foresee unpleasant developments we would like to prevent we will use this knowledge rather than our intuition. Like physics is

there to govern nature, sociology will be the tool to govern human society and history.

Surely this kind of programme was no small contribution to foster human knowledge: it was a radical programme even including a hidden assumption of superiority. It meant that that science which would strive for such aims would, in the long run, become not just another discipline but the “queen of science”, at least of the human sciences. This science would not just offer its modest contribution to the furtherance of human wisdom, this science would become the science of sciences.

This was, in an extremely condensed version, the foundation programme of sociology of only about one hundred years ago. Its traces still can be found in many ways and forms in sociology of today. There still are many members of our discipline who support this basic concept and want to fulfil it, at least in the (very) long run. Certainly, it is not formulated in these crude terms today but we encounter still the basic convictions that stand behind this programme.

I know – and hope – that such ideas can be found in the minds of (most) of our students. Because of such motives they decided to study sociology, instead of economics, jurisprudence or medicine, all those respected disciplines that have as their aim professional job qualifications. Sociology still is that intellectual enterprise where one can learn about human beings and about society without direct practical and professional usage outside the reproduction of academic sociology itself. And the ultimate aim of such learning is to help human beings to understand themselves as members of societies, to understand the working of societies and their history, to help them cope with society and not only remain a victim of social pressures or so-called historical laws. To this very day sociology attracts people who search for knowledge and instruments to understand society and to gain that intellectual power that stems from knowledge and to use it actively to change society.

Why then is there this recurring feeling of a “crisis” of sociology? I think that one of the most crucial reasons for the atmosphere of discontent is the fact that the sociological quest for a “Good Society” has been banned from the scientific agenda of academic sociology almost totally. This, I argue, has led to some sort of an intellectual paralysis of sociology. The original belief in science, in former times almost grotesquely strong, changed to a style of complete subjectivity and the well-known mentality of “anything goes”.

Of course, students of sociology in their first year have to learn that scientific sociology is not to be mistaken for social-work, social politics, not to mention socialism. Regardless of the fact that sociology has become an analytical and empirical science, in distance to its former sense of moral mission, the old

motif of its creation can still be reconstructed. The dream of a "Good society", a human society, the search for an ethical basis of sociological research has always been the "spirit in the machine" of the social sciences, as Irving Louis Horowitz has pointed out. This "spirit" still lingers in some heads, regardless of the "scientific turn" of academic sociology.

3. Should academic sociology reclaim the profile of *science morale*?

What then could be the task of sociology as a modern "moral science", as one institutional basis for "moral awareness"?

Behind this question stands the much more fundamental question: What kind of sociology is necessary for the 21st century? What I have in mind is not only a sociology *of* the 21st century but one *for* the 21st century. And that means a sociology for those human beings who will make that step into the next century.

Let me first mention briefly some inner-sociological prerequisites which I regard as self-evident: most important is the necessary end of the paradigmatic separation of the infamous micro- and macro-version of sociological theories, as well as the end of the split between quantitative and qualitative methods in social research. Ever since the intermediate theoretical and empirical work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Norbert Elias, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, such splits should become part of the historical past of proto-sociological concepts.

By now the necessity of a self-reflexive sociology should be as obvious as the demand for a sociology sceptical and critical of all forms of domination in whatever domain. Leaving such self-evident requirements for a future sociology aside I would like to turn to my main concern which is much more controversial: the re-turn of scientific sociology from a *wert(urteils)freie*, a "value-judgement-free" enterprise to a *wertbezogene*, a "value-related" one.

It seems to be easy to say that sociology should ask for the "Good society". But are there sociological standards for the "goodness" of a society, for a society orientated towards the furtherance of the well-being of humans? Is it really the last word of sociology in this respect to only denounce such asking as nothing but the outcome not of rational search for scientific truth, but of irrational longing, as Theodor W. Adorno wanted us to believe?

If sociology, I would like to argue, as an intellectual and scholarly enterprise dismisses the intellectual co-operation in the planning and construction of a

“Good Society”, the formulation of such a programme of a “good social order”, the inner liquidation of the enterprise sociology which began with such enthusiasm and hope in the 19th century is immanent. Sociology will lose its inner legitimisation if it stops reaching out for the “Good Life” and terminates the co-operation in the creation of an “utopian realism”.

Future sociology, in my opinion, will have to ask questions like these:

- What does a “human” live in society mean?
- What makes humans into “moral” beings?
- What kind of morals can sociologically be justified?
- What kind of social conditions will have to be fulfilled to enable humans to lead moral lives?

The enormous pretension of Comte to make sociology the main guiding science surely has to be abandoned by the end of the 20th century. But the almost total detachment of sociology from philosophy and political philosophy will have to be scrutinised again. Not in terms of “going back” but in the sense of re-opening the systematic discourse with these fields of human wisdom. Maybe sociology historically could only develop by its emancipation from these traditional moral sciences. But now, after a hundred years of emancipation it should be possible to think anew about dealing with morals in a scientific way free of morals. I am not talking about a “sociological turn” of ethical discourse but rather about the necessity for sociology as a discipline to participate in the attempts to find therapies of moral orientation for human beings who not only lost orientation but are desperately seeking for it.

In the historical beginning of sociology it certainly was not totally without justification when the Founding Fathers of our discipline, like Emile Durkheim, tried to construct sociology as a *science morale* in conscious separation from moral-philosophy. The programme of an empirical social scientific research of morals can only be questioned if it can be shown that human beings whose morals are researched rather search for points of orientation than for scientific analyses of their moral standards. Durkheim’s agenda might have come to an end: humans who have become insecure in their moral orientations will not find great help by a mystification of morality or the offer of a cult of “individualism”. This certainly offers no help in the desperate search for moral integration for individuals or for society. The moral disorientation of individuals and societies cannot be clarified by a social-scientific research of its loss of orientation and destruction.

If one wants to resume sociology as a *science morale* today one has to find answers to the question where the standards of morals may be. The question for “standards” of truth, justice, morality, and the perspectives of a “human

society”, a “Civil Society”, will not be substituted by perspectives of pluralistic orientation. Of this we do have enough these days, like perspectives of gender, of race, of classes, of cultures, of religions, of ideological positions. The intellectual-scientific reaction to this fragmentarisation of our various world-experiences must not be the capitulation in an either cynical or nihilistic world view, nor must it lead to the return to a technical fetishism in social research, nor to an empty game of “theoretical” debates. The challenge for sociology will be to help and participate in the construction of new forms of a value-consensus in a world so complicated and differentiated like ours of today.

4. Agenda for sociological intellectuals in the 21st century

What I am trying to depict here is the agenda for sociology as a sort of hotbed and training camp of intellectuals, of sociological *savants*, empirically grounded, using the whole of sociology’s theoretical achievements and supporting the development of a socio-political and ethical conscience. Intellectuals who do not distance themselves from social reality, trying to accept responsibility by intervention in political debates and conflicts. Of course, such sociological intellectuals would not stand apart from general political fights for power, they instead become crucial participants in them by using their intellectual and rhetorical capabilities to reach out for power themselves.

Following a common sense model of intellectuals it is times of “crises” which call for intellectuals to put forward their critical diagnosis and their enlightening vision for future development. Where, so to speak, is the Marx, Weber, Durkheim of our times? At the turn to the 21st century we will have to accept the sobering judgement that the “classical” intellectual like in the Dreyfus-model does not exist any more. Distancing ourselves from role-models like Raymond Aron and Jean Paul Sartre, who represented the intellectual as a *spectateur engagé et enragé*, we might be better advised to follow Bourdieus recommendation of the sociologist who simply follow their *métier militant*. An engaged observer and an enraged critic of society, the intellectual as an advocate of the universal who speaks in the name of humankind in the face of the pervasive individual pursuit of particular interests. The intellectual as the protagonist of a general morality who fights with *Zivilcourage* for freedom, tolerance and solidarity, the partisan of the underprivileged who articulates injustice and argues for fairness and tolerance.

All these tasks the modern sociological intellectual is able to meet thanks to status and social position located in occupations close to the media informed

public, like artists and writers, journalists and university professors, nevertheless *freischwebend*, in the sense not belonging to one particular political party or an interest group. Always precarious the modern sociological intellectual enjoys an independent status granted by the right of freedom of speech in and by the public.

Such a “plantation” of sociological intellectuals could, in my opinion, only be set up in universities as places of the education of neither technocrats nor ideologues. The old motto of the great German educator Wilhelm von Humboldt, popularised by the German sociologist Helmut Schelsky: *Bildung durch Wissenschaft*, education by science, might have become even more important today than ever. This will be needed to enter the necessary interdisciplinary discourse, to pursue a multicultural and global orientation and to construct an ecological responsibility.

What I want to ask for myself and our discipline is to strengthen the interest and engagement in public affairs, and to leave the protecting walls of the ivory-towers of our universities. The intervention by sociologists in the political arena and in the media dominated discourse on values could and should be improved strongly.

What I am thinking about is the dialogue, first of all within sociology itself about the possibility of a sociological discourse about values and morals. But also a dialogical co-operation between sociology and the disciplines of the traditional “value specialists”, like political philosophy, comparative religious studies, and theologies. If the co-operation of sociologists in the construction of a rational, non-religious ethics, should be the aim of sociology at all, it will not be realised without such dialogue. In such a dialogue sociological intellectuals could show whether we have something to offer or not. The principles of this dialogue will have to be a serious effort of understanding each other, the acceptance of the differences, a “politics of acceptance”. It could be the dialogue of the 21st century.

5. History of sociology as intellectual heritage of sociology

If you agree with this vision of future academic sociology of remaining/becoming the hotbed and training camp of sociological *savants*, empirically grounded, using the whole of sociology’s theoretical achievements and supporting the development of a socio-political and ethical conscience, you will agree that being familiar with the history of sociology is indispensable. As sociologists who do research on the history of our discipline we are well prepared to play

the role of guardians of the canonical wisdom of more than hundred years of great intellectual achievements, empirical findings, concepts, and theories. We have a honourable duty to fulfil for the discipline of sociology, as long as it is still alive. It does depend upon ourselves whether academic sociology, this product of the 19th century will survive and in what forms it might develop in the 21st century.

Author's address:

Dirk Kaesler
Institut für Soziologie
Philipps-Universität Marburg
Am Grün 1 (Fronhof)
D-35032 Marburg
E-mail: kaesler@mail.uni-marburg.de

Kurt Imhof / Peter Schulz (Hrsg.)

Reihe «Mediensymposium Luzern» Band 3

«Kommunikation und Revolution»

Das Thema «Kommunikation und Revolution» steht wie kaum ein anderes an der Schnittstelle von zwei zentralen Fragen der Öffentlichkeitsforschung. Der Frage nach dem «Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit» einerseits und der Frage nach dem sozialen Wandel moderner Gesellschaften in Gestalt von Revolutionen, Krisen, Zäsuren, Epochenenden und -anfängen andererseits. Umbrüche verändern die Produktionsbedingungen und -formen der öffentlichen Kommunikation – Revolutionen als Produkt öffentlicher Kommunikation ändern die Reproduktionsbedingungen einer Gesellschaft. Nach Revolutionen und Umwälzungen beginnt – selbst wenn sie scheitern – etwas Neues: Die Gesellschaft danach lässt sich nicht umstandslos mit derjenigen zuvor in Beziehung setzen, der Umbruch dazwischen konstituiert etwas, das sich aus Entwicklungstrends nicht ableiten lässt. Die Einsicht in kontingente Transformationsperioden, in Zeitläufe also, in denen es auch ganz anders hätte herauskommen können, als es herausgekommen ist, mahnt zur Vorsicht gegenüber den nach wie vor gängigen Trendperspektiven in den Sozialwissenschaften und richtet unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf die Diskontinuität der Moderne.

In diesem Buch setzen sich Kommunikationswissenschaftler aus Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz mit diesem Thema auseinander.



PD Dr. Kurt Imhof ist Soziologe und Historiker und leitet den «Forschungsbereich Öffentlichkeitssoziologie und -geschichte» am Soziologischen Institut der Universität Zürich.

Peter Schulz ist Direktor der «Stiftung Akademie 91 Zentralschweiz».

Seismo
Verlag

Erhältlich im Buchhandel
oder direkt beim Seismo Verlag
Postfach 313, CH-8028 Zürich
Telefon 01 251 11 94
E-Mail: seismo@gmx.net

ISBN 3-908239-62-1
494 Seiten
15.5x22.5 cm
broschiert
SFr. 69.–/DM 86.–/ÖS 552