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## REVIEW ESSAYS

### Norbert Elias and Figural Sociology: The Comeback of the Century

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Norbert Elias (1897–1990) has been recognized belatedly in American sociology, even though the prefaces to his collected works claim he was “one of the great sociologists of our time”. This more British and European judgment—Elias won the first versions of both the Theodor Adorno Award (1977) and the European Amali Prize for social science (1987)—would generally come as a surprise for American sociologists. Indeed, if sociology were a sport, Elias would win the “comeback of the century award” (Gordon 2002: 68). Yet as Edward Shils once pointed out, the “success” and visibility of sociological ideas have only a weak relationship to their enduring validity. Shils’ case in point, writing in 1970, was that whereas Frankfurt School Critical Theory had become popular primarily because of its politics and strategic “ecological” location, Karl Mannheim’s sociology had been unjustly marginalized despite its greater sociological depth (Shils 1980). Despite the tendentiousness of his comparative judgments, Shils’ sociological argument about the marginalizing effects of ecological locations could be applied even more tellingly to Elias, Mannheim’s onetime assistant. Ironically, however, from the perspective of critical social theory all three of these cases can now be viewed in a very different political context as more complementary than competing, sharing a historicist, post-empiricist conception of social theory whose post-Kantian interpretive structuralism could not be comprehended within the categories of logical empiricism and positivism.

Following a doctorate on Kant in philosophy, Elias became a sociology student of Alfred Weber (Max’s younger brother) in Heidelberg in 1925 for his *Habilitation* research (necessary for a teaching position). There he also met and befriended Mannheim, becoming his assistant when he

*Early Writings*, by **Norbert Elias**. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, Volume 1, edited by Richard Kilminster. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Dublin, IE: University College Dublin Press/Dufour Editions, 2006. 136pp. \$74.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781904558392.

*The Court Society*, by **Norbert Elias**. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias Volume 2, edited by Stephen Mennell. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Dublin, IE: University College Dublin Press/Dufour Editions, 2006. 331pp. \$109.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781904558408.

*Involvement and Detachment*, by **Norbert Elias**. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, Volume 8, edited by Stephen Quilley. Dublin, IE: University College Dublin Press/Dufour Editions, 2007. 252pp. \$119.95 cloth. ISBN 9781904558422.

*An Essay on Time*, by **Norbert Elias**. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, Volume 9, edited by Steven Loyal and Stephen Mennell. Dublin, IE: University College Dublin Press/Dufour Editions, 2007. 182pp. \$109.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781904558415.

*Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology*, by **Richard Kilminster**. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007. 209pp. \$150.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780415437066.

left in 1930 for a chair in Frankfurt. Though only 4 years younger than Mannheim, he had lost considerable career time because of traumatic World War I military duty and post-war family economic problems. In contrast to Mannheim, however, Elias lived a long—as

well as productive—sociological life, despite immense personal difficulties after fleeing Germany in 1933. He stayed first in Paris (2 years), then London where he was interned for several months. Initially surviving as an adjunct teacher in adult education, he was only able to secure an adequate university position in his late 50's at the University of Leicester, retiring in 1962, at a time when British sociology had not yet emerged as a visible center for theoretical sociology. His *magnum opus*, *The Civilizing Process*, which had appeared in German in Switzerland in 1939, was only translated much later with a confusing delay between the first and second volumes (1977, 1982). Nevertheless, his nearly three post-retirement decades were very productive and contributed to considerable international recognition as the proponent of a process-oriented *figurational sociology*, especially in Britain, Holland, France and his native Germany.

These four Elias volumes are an arbitrary selection from the projected 18 volumes of his anticipated *Collected Works* in English. With the exception of some of his early essays, they all appeared earlier in English. But the *Collected Works*—coordinated with the German Suhrkamp version—include revised translations and alternative versions that are carefully explained in “Notes on the Text”. Complementing his contribution as chair of the editorial advisory board of the *Collected Works*, Richard Kilminster's study of Elias adds important insights that go beyond earlier studies by former students. These works will be discussed in three steps: an initial introduction to the origins and claims of Elias' key conceptual categories; a brief discussion of the four Elias volumes under review; and a more general commentary on Elias' status as a social theorist that engages aspects of Kilminster's carefully researched and provocative study.

Given his general avoidance of discussing the works of others, it is difficult to trace with precision the origins of Elias' approach. Nevertheless, his “process sociology” can be viewed as an innovative synthesis of several influences: the topic of “civilization” versus “culture” from Alfred Weber; the diffuse impact of Max Weber, especially his theories of the patrimonial state and rationalization (despite his problematic individualism); a

close intellectual relationship with Karl Mannheim, expanding his conceptions of the sociogenesis of culture in new directions; and a selective use of Freud for offsetting Max Weber's excessively rational actor through a sociology of emotions focusing on shame and embarrassment in self-regulation. The broader context was the general sociological and existentialist reaction against the abstract individualism of the German neo-Kantian philosophical tradition (a theme explored in depth in Kilminster's study).

In partial contrast to Mannheim, and even more stridently than Max Weber, Elias disdained abstract, general theorizing, insisting that sociological theory resist the temptation of philosophical theoreticism. For such reasons Elias tended to view epistemological and methodological discussions as a waste of time, even though he touched on such issues later to legitimate his own approach, whose “empirical” focus conflicted with his general theoretical impulses. His overall theoretical perspective arose out of his earlier historically grounded arguments about the “civilizing process” that arose from the pacification of feudal warriors through the sublimation and reduction of violence, the result of its monopolization by the state and the transformation of sentiments in court society. Later this theme was extended to an analysis of the sociogenesis of sports, i.e. how the reduction of violence pioneered in English sports was parallel to broader civilizing processes. Despite his aversion to philosophical questions, however, he did eventually elaborate the broader theoretical foundations of his “figurational sociology”, though eventually preferring “process sociology” as less subject to misuse. Despite its vagueness, the notion of “figurations” does provide a useful way of characterizing the foundations of social life in human interdependencies and the need to overcome the dualism of agency and structure (a theme later developed in somewhat different ways by Giddens, who was familiar with Elias's work when a student in Leicester).

Beyond their biographical interest (e.g. his early involvement with a moderate form of Zionism about which he later remained silent), the *Early Writings* (prior to 1939, five of ten of which appear in English for the first time) anticipate several aspects of his later



development: his reservations about philosophy and Kantian rationalism in particular (evident in a doctoral dissertation on Kant and history that was almost rejected); an outline of a never completed *Habilitation* with Alfred Weber on connections between Italian Renaissance painting and the origins of modern natural sciences; and an essay that reveals his early relationship with Mannheim as a transformative intellectual experience, even though he never later acknowledged the extent of his debts to his mentor.

*The Court Society*—based on the *Habilitation* research prepared for Mannheim but not formally accepted because of the Nazi purge of universities in 1933—provided the first version of arguments elaborated more fully and theoretically in the later *Civilizing Process*. Nevertheless, the published version of *The Court Society*—focusing on the household of Louis XIV—is based on a typescript (since disappeared) of the original text that Elias discovered while moving in 1966. The new version first published in German in 1969 included considerable new material: an introductory chapter on the methodology of historical sociology, cross-references to his interim work, an essay on aristocratic romanticism, and two appendixes.

The final two volumes in question are linked to the sociology of knowledge. The volume collected as *Involvement and Detachment*—written from the 1950s to 1980s—represents Elias' first major work written in English. The origins of his concerns—not discussed by Elias himself—can be traced to an effort to move beyond some of the limitations of Weber's conception of value-free sociology and to further develop Mannheim's conception of "de-distanciation" as an outcome of the increased participation of outsiders in the modern state, thus challenging hierarchical relations of social distance. As Kilminster suggests, Elias transformed the theme of social distance from values found in Weber (a more voluntaristic notion) into one of detachment that understood the self-control of affects as the outcome of social processes (p. 112). The problem of rational scientific conduct thus becomes a question of a balance between involvement and detachment, not a binary choice. Consequently, as Elias writes, both the natural and social sciences have similar

aims as scientific activities, but differ with respect to the sets of values they involve: "But social as distinct from natural sciences are concerned with conjunctions of persons . . . people face themselves: the 'objects' are also 'subjects'" (p. 79). Most importantly, the problem of objectivity in social research is not an individual problem as opposed to one of professional autonomy: "how to keep their two roles as participant and as inquirers clearly and consistently apart, and, as a professional group, how to establish in their work the undisputed dominance of the latter" (p. 84). For such reasons Elias viewed highly engaged social inquiry—or even "public sociology" today—with suspicion, a stance that has led to the criticism of his work as apolitical and positivist.

*An Essay on Time*—written toward the end of his life in the 1980s—is not regarded as one of his best works, given its repetitions, digressions and inconsistent arguments. These limitations are related to his advanced age and the conditions of its slow production when poor eyesight led to the dictation of texts. Nevertheless, it remains of interest for anyone concerned with the historical analysis of time and "timing" as a social institution embedded in human activities and practices.

Despite its relative brevity, Kilminster's book provides a fairly comprehensive contextualization of Elias' thought: the difficulties of "understanding Elias"; the origins of his synthesis as a reaction against Kantian rationalism that parallels existentialism; and his affinities with and differences from Mannheim. Subsequent chapters sympathetically reconstruct three of Elias' major concerns: the historical research culminating in *The Civilizing Process* and the often misunderstood "developmental" concepts employed (which are neither teleological nor fatally Eurocentric and potentially reversible as "decivilizing" processes); the sociology of knowledge as discussed under the heading of "involved detachment"; and his final, more speculative "symbolic theory" as a secular humanist research program that attempted to link evolutionary biology and sociology. Some "concluding remarks" attempt to defend the distinctive "radical" implications of Elias' perspective in the contemporary context.

Elias has been criticized as a “positivist” for his defense of the autonomy of sociology and resistance to activist engagement. The subtitle of Kilminster’s study of Norbert Elias—“Post-Philosophical Sociology”—effectively captures the polemical thrust of his defense of Elias, reflecting his own ambivalence toward both more recent philosophical tendencies in sociology (poststructuralism, postmodernism) and earlier militant conceptions of sociology’s political engagements. Consequently he defends Elias’ notion of detachment and engagement and rejects characterizations of his approach as apolitical and latently positivistic. Two more controversial claims seek to bolster the “challenge” of Elias. First, he is credited with delivering the “fourth flow to man’s narcissism”, thus providing the sociological culmination of Freud’s demystifying trio of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud himself (p. 154). Such narcissism is expressed primarily in the humanism of Kantian transcendental philosophy, but transcendentalism has also been the target of postmodernist critiques of metanarratives (e.g., “the death of man”) originating in Nietzsche, but also expressed in historicism and the linguistic turn (e.g., Mannheim, Wittgenstein, American pragmatism) and contemporary post-metaphysical critiques of foundationalism generally (e.g., Foucault, Derrida and even Habermas). So why was Elias so distinctive, aside from the scientism of his faith in an autonomous sociology cut off from philosophy? Second, it is argued that Elias forces us among other things to “unlearn much of our sociological education”, as well as “abandon philosophy, Marxism, the leading concept of ‘modernity’, critical theory and the fashionable ‘social theory’; suspend political ideologies as guides to our research” (p. 152). It might be more persuasive to say, however, that Elias facilitates the “problematization” of such strategies.

Beyond its questionable provocations, Kilminster’s study provides an indispensable reference point for further research on Elias. Nevertheless, the discussion is selective in certain respects and fails to consider important limitations of Eliasian sociology. On the one hand, as Nicos Mouzelis has stressed, perhaps the most fundamental limitation of figurational sociology is its focus on analysis

at the level of “social integration” as opposed to “system” integration, following Goldthorpe’s distinction (Mouzelis 1995: 77–79). On the other hand, Elias has also been criticized for his neglect to the cultural contexts of violence reduction, e.g. religion—a surprising omission given Weber’s concerns (Turner 2004)—and democracy as a cultural presupposition (Arnason 1989). Such issues, however, simply provide possible strategies for the further development and historical specification of his approach, not its rejection.

The increasing use of Elias is most evident in the online newsletter *Figurations*, other efforts of the Norbert Elias Foundation, the creation of an Elias Working Group in the Comparative Sociology section of the International Sociological Association, and a now extensive secondary literature. Significantly, his delayed recognition has also been reinforced by the affinities of his work with that of Bourdieu, Foucault and the Annales School. Elias had earlier and independently introduced the concept of habitus and Bourdieu draws upon Elias in his *The State Nobility* (1989). As well, various studies have explored the relations between Foucault’s account of power and the subject and Elias’ understanding of self-regulation in the civilizing process. At this new juncture—the widespread recognition of Elias as a major twentieth century social theorist—the question becomes that of future strategies for appropriating and further developing his work. The increasing extension of Eliasian concepts to non-European contexts marks an important development, as evident in violence studies generally and the recent (2007) Frankfurt conference devoted to “A Figurational Approach to American Studies” and Loïc Wacquant’s keynote address on “Decivilizing the Penal State”, a theme partly introduced earlier as “Elias in the Dark Ghetto” and now published as a whole (Wacquant 2004). The future reception of figurational sociology will likely not involve its appreciation and use as primarily a stand-alone theoretical “system” or paradigm. Nevertheless, as Kilminster warns, the risk here is an eclectic use of Eliasian concepts that simply accommodates to and reinforces many of the problematic practices of contemporary sociology and social theory.

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