

Apologia pro vita sociologica sua: social character and historical process, and why I became an Eliasian sociologist

In 1854, John Henry Newman, subsequently Cardinal Newman, founded the Catholic University of Ireland in this very building. University College Dublin traces its origins back to Newman's university.

Newman had originally been a clergyman in the Church of England, and a prominent academic in Oxford. Victorian England, in which theological questions still mattered, had been transfixed by Newman's gradual movement towards the Roman Catholic Church, into which he was finally received in 1845 – a move that the Protestant establishment regarded as eccentric at best, scandalous at worst. Some years later, he responded to an attack on his views by the Anglican Charles Kingsley, in what became Newman's famous book *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.¹ It made Newman probably the foremost exponent of Catholicism in the English-speaking world.

Meeting as we are today in Newman House, it seems appropriate to offer some reflections on how my own career was shaped by my encounter with Norbert Elias and his brand of sociology; my 'conversion' may not have been regarded quite as scandalous by the British sociological establishment, but it was certainly considered eccentric.

Let me break down my career into phases – a 'phaseology' of the type that Joop Goudsblom advocates² – and try to explain why 'social character and historical process' has been a *Leitmotiv* in my thinking.

1. Before Cambridge: schooldays in Bradford and Huddersfield

I grew up in working-class communities in Yorkshire. In my teenage years I read Richard Hoggart's classic book *The Uses of Literacy*. His description of growing up before the war in the Hunslet area of Leeds was so much like my own experience in post-war Manningham in

¹ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864).

² Johan Goudsblom, 'Human history and long-term social processes: toward a synthesis of chronology and phaseology', in Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones and Stephen Mennell, *The Course of Human History: Economic Growth, Social Process, and Civilization* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), pp. 15–30.

neighbouring Bradford that it read to me like autobiography.³ (Mind you, I seem to have been sheltered from the salty sexual sayings that Hoggart records.) Equally feeling like autobiography was Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's *Education and the Working Class*,⁴ which was based on interviews with upwardly mobile 'scholarship boys' who were alumni of the very school in Huddersfield to which I moved when I was 16. I could actually identify some of their respondents, even though they were supposed to be anonymised. These two books also chimed with the affinity I already felt to the anti-commercial cultural critique of capitalism stemming in particular from William Morris.⁵ That continuing anti-commercial feeling, of course, puts me at odds with the entire modern Western world. But, more to the point today, I can see in my teenage years the beginnings of my interest in the theme of this conference: social character and historical process.

Mind you, it was not predestined that I become a sociologist. My passions at school were history and geography. I would probably have read history at university, were it not that I ended up not having 'O'-level Latin, which in those remote days of half a century ago was a prerequisite for all history courses in every British university except Hull – and I didn't want to go to Hull. ('From Hell, Hull and Halifax, Good Lord preserve us.') Why I did not have Latin is a nice little application of C. Wright Mills's dictum that the sociological task involves the ability 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society'.⁶ In 1957, when I was 13, the USSR launched the first Sputnik, triggering the 'space race', and then all little boys of my age were urged to become rocket engineers and nuclear physicists – so I opted for the science stream, not realising that it involved dropping Latin. Later, I switched back to Arts subjects, but by then it was too late. But I could matriculate at Cambridge with my two modern languages, French and German. So I ended up reading the Economics Tripos, in which sociology was then what would now be called a 'minor'.

2. Cambridge

I have never regretted acquiring a basic knowledge of economics, if only on the principle of

³ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).

⁴ Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

⁵ See Anthony Crosland's discussion of socialist doctrines that helped to shape the British Labour Party, in *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), especially pp. 83–4.

⁶ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 6.

‘Know thine enemy’, but I soon gravitated towards sociology. It was taught by John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Philip Abrams, and Earl Hopper.

From Goldthorpe in particular I came to appreciate how to use *theory* – in the strict sense. That is, by ‘theory’ I have always understood a system of general propositions and initial observations from which it was possible to deduce further implications capable of empirical–theoretical testing through observation – the process through which the stock of reliable knowledge grows. I always admired the rigorous way in which John deduced empirically testable hypotheses from what were originally little more than speculative hunches. For example, *The Affluent Worker*,⁷ the outcome of ‘the Luton Study’ that was in full swing when I was a student, was a response to the suggestion that economic affluence would inevitably make working-class people shift politically to the right.⁸ I’m not sure whether all of the conclusions John has drawn from his empirical research have withstood the test of time, but I still admire the research and the reasoning. I suppose that, for a decade or more, under John’s influence I was a Popperian.

It is therefore a pity that John Goldthorpe came to disapprove so emphatically of the specific theory I sought to treat in this way, trying to extend and test interesting insights derived from it: I refer of course to that of Norbert Elias. In particular, John came to be dismissive of the sociological use of historical evidence, to be a champion of what Elias called ‘the retreat of sociologists into the present’,⁹ and even to play footsie with rational choice theory – of which more later.¹⁰

⁷ John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechofer and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968–9).

⁸ See Ferdynand Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society* (London: Heinemann, 1960); Mark Abrams and Richard Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)

⁹ Norbert Elias, ‘The retreat of sociologists into the present’, in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 16]), pp. 107–126.

¹⁰ John H. Goldthorpe, *On Sociology: Numbers, Narratives and the Integration of Research and Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially pp. 28–44, ‘The uses of history in sociology: reflections on some recent trends’. See Michael Mann’s response to this essay upon its first publication: ‘In praise of macro-sociology: a reply to Goldthorpe’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 45, (1994), pp. 39–52. Earlier, and more specifically from an Eliasian standpoint, Eric Dunning had, in response to Goldthorpe’s advocacy of Popper, written ‘In defence of developmental sociology: a critique of Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism* with special reference to the theory of Auguste Comte’, *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 4: 3 (1977), pp. 327–49.

3. Harvard

In 1966, I went to Harvard on a Frank Knox Fellowship, because that was where all the sociological theory then seemed to come from. It is hard for younger sociologists to imagine how dominant Talcott Parsons was at the time. Even David Lockwood, who is now remembered as an early opponent of Parsonian theory, organised his lectures essentially in terms of Parsons's categories.¹¹ About 20 years earlier, Parsons had played a leading part in the creation of the interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations, which brought together social anthropology, sociology, social psychology and clinical psychology. The connections between sociology, anthropology, psychology, and history still seem to me to be the central intellectual problem of the social sciences – the problem of 'Social character and historical processes'. And if the star-studded Department of Social Relations could not crack it, it seemed that no one could. Among the others whose lectures I attended were: Robert Bellah, George Homans, Seymour Martin Lipset, David Riesman, Kenneth Gergen, Roger Brown, David Maybury-Lewis, Stanley Milgram, Paul Hollander and Gino Germani.

I chatted to Parsons quite a lot, and became the recognised expert on his ideas among the first-year graduate students; but after close study I also decided he had gone bonkers. This was confirmed when I witnessed him invent a fourth component for the Holy Trinity, in order to make it fit neatly into his AGIL system of fourfold 'functional exigencies'. His goal seemed to be a kind of crazy conceptual filing cabinet. Taxonomy of course plays some part in the growth of scientific knowledge, as the name of Linnaeus reminds us. The problem was that I found it simply impossible to deduce from Parsons's intellectual Heath Robinson contraption any questions that might prove interesting as a subject for PhD research. Only later, under the tutelage of Elias, did I come to understand why that was so: that Parsons had taken the wrong turn from the beginning. In his essay in intellectual autobiography, Parsons acknowledges that his reading of Kant as an undergraduate at Amherst was his crucial point of departure.¹² But only later did I grasp that Parsons was indulging in a grand exercise in what Elias called *Zustandsreduktion* or 'process-reduction'. Theory must have moving parts.

Fortunately, I was able to resist drawing the conclusion that, in being unable to make use of the ideas of the world's greatest sociological theorist, I was uniquely stupid. There were many sceptical voices. I took a reading course on the philosophy of science with George Homans, who told me (and no doubt many others) that 'the trouble with Talcott is that he's a

¹¹ See my undergraduate lecture notes, now in the archive of the Marshall Library, Cambridge.

¹² Talcott Parsons, 'On building social system theory: a personal history', *Daedalus*, 99: 4 (1970), pp. 826–81.

great empirical sociologist, but he's no good at theory!' I also learnt a lot from Hermínio Martins, who introduced us to a less hard-line positivistic view of the philosophy of social science. I shall always treasure Hermínio's opening words in his seminars on 'The nature of theory, prediction and explanation in the social sciences':

A cursory reading of the philosophy of science may lead one to the premature conclusion that sociology is a series of abortions. But, like sexual intercourse, you are in the end bound to get it.¹³

The strong conclusion was that one need not as a sociologist succumb to 'physics envy' and have wish-dreams of wearing a white laboratory coat, but on the other hand theories did have to make possible deductive inferences capable of empirical test. They had to make possible *predictions*, and if the predictions were borne out by empirical evidence, the logical structure that produced the prediction also offered an *explanation*. From Hermínio, I first learned a point that proved significant in my future research: that prediction includes not only 'prediction' about the chronological future, but also *retrodiction* – that is, predictions about what one may be likely to unearth about the *past*.

It was also from Hermínio that I first heard the distinction between 'the Hobbesian problem of order', which Parsons claimed to be solving, and 'the Cartesian problem of order'. As it turned out, Descartes and not Hobbes proved to be the central figure for most of 'social theory' in the ensuing half century.

I spent my time at Harvard in the company of the first-year PhD students.¹⁴ One major theme ran right through the year's graduate seminar: the so-called 'macro/micro' problem. This is more or less the same as the 'individual and society' problem, or the 'agency and structure' problem.

Apart from Parsons's efforts to tackle this problem (or congeries of problems), we spent a lot of time discussing Peter Blau's then new book *Exchange and Power in Social Life*.¹⁵ 'Exchange theory' had really been initiated by George Homans's 1961 book *Social*

¹³ Faithfully recorded in my own lecture notes, consulted in December 2015.

¹⁴ As a Frank Knox Memorial Fellow, I was technically I was not one of them, although I could have opted into PhD registration.

¹⁵ Peter M. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms,¹⁶ which, in reviving the utilitarian strand in sociological theory and seeking to adapt insights from economics, effectively marked the beginnings of today's 'rational choice theory'. Blau's book so impressed one of my postgraduate friends, Siegwart Lindenberg, that for the remainder of his career he has been a leading champion of rational choice theory. At that time, however, I knew a lot more economics than Siggy did, and I was not convinced. Blau really only went beyond Homans in using the economists' paraphernalia of indifference curves, Edgeworth boxes and Pareto optima, which lent his ideas a false aura of precision. Rational choice theory may be useful in analysing some specific short-term problems, but fundamentally its central assumption remains the same as Lord Macaulay identified in his 1829 review of James Mill's utilitarian *Essay on Government*: the proposition that 'a man had rather do what a man had rather do'.¹⁷ The sociological task is to explain *how and why* it comes about that 'a man had rather do' *what* he had rather do – in other words, how social character is shaped through historical processes.

Moreover, Blau's claim to have bridged the macro/micro gap proved on close examination to rest merely on borrowing Parsons's *Leitmotiv* of 'shared values'. Many years later, to mark Elias's centenary in 1997, Joop Goudsblom and I organised a session on Elias at the ASA annual conference in Toronto. The overall theme chosen for the conference was 'the macro/micro problem', and it served to demonstrate that American sociology was no nearer solving this problem (or non-problem) than it had been 30 years earlier.

4. Accidental encounter with Elias

From Harvard I went directly to the University of Exeter, as an extremely young lecturer. In my early lectures on sociological theory, I was still grappling with the macro/micro problem. In 1970 there appeared an article by Alan Dawe, in which he argued not only that there *were* two separate sociologies, but that they could *never* be integrated and reconciled with each other.¹⁸ This infuriated me. Dawe's view that the micro and the macro could never be synthesised seemed to me a recipe for intellectual laziness. My first book was quietly a

¹⁶ George C. Homans, *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

¹⁷ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Mill on Government', *Edinburgh Review*, March 1829, reprinted in *Macaulay's Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches*, ed. George Otto Trevelyan (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), pp. 160–83.

¹⁸ Alan Dawe, 'The two sociologies', *British Journal of Sociology*, 21: 2 (1970), pp. 207–18.

polemic against Dawe.¹⁹ Not that I knew exactly how to achieve the synthesis. But I thought the way forward must lie in the general area of Georg Simmel's discussion of 'the significance of numbers for social life', written as far back as 1908.²⁰

It was at this point that a seminal accident brought me into contact with Norbert Elias. I have told the story more fully elsewhere,²¹ but the gist of it is that I was asked to assist Grace Morrissey, the wife of an Exeter colleague, in translating a new book entitled *Was ist Soziologie?* The rest, so to speak, is history. At first I couldn't make out what Elias was on about. The first chapter, 'Sociology: the questions framed by Comte', gave an evaluation of Auguste Comte quite at odds with what I had heard from John Goldthorpe (and even from Robert Bellah). But the penny dropped when we came to translate chapter 3, the 'Game Models'. Most people probably come to admire Elias through *On the Process of Civilisation*,²² but at the time of which I am speaking that book had not been translated into English, nor indeed into French, the language in which I first read it. No, it was *What is Sociology?* that brought about my Damascene conversion.

That brilliant third chapter does many things. It shows how much more fundamental is the concept of *interdependence* than 'interaction'. In my experience, most American sociologists are unable to distinguish between the two. In every human relationship of interdependence there is ineluctably a power ratio or balance of power. Not an *equal* balance of power, as implied in the Parsons–Shils model of mutually supportive dyadic interaction,²³ and in most interactionist models, but an unequal and often fluctuating balance of strength, depending on which side is most dependent on the other for their needs – needs that may be material, emotional or cognitive. As he increases the number of players in his game models, and as power ratios become relatively more equal, Elias shows how the course of the game becomes a process less and less in accordance with the plans and intentions of any of the

¹⁹ Stephen Mennell, *Sociological Theory: Uses and Unities* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1974).

²⁰ Georg Simmel, 'On the significance of numbers for social life', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), pp. 87–104.

²¹ Stephen Mennell, 'Elias and the counter-ego', *History of the Human Sciences*, 19: (2006), pp. 73–91.

²² Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 3]). Earlier editions published in two volumes in 1978 and 1982, then in one volume in 1994 and 200, all appeared under the title *The Civilizing Process*.

²³ Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, with the assistance of James Olds, 'Values, motives and systems of action', in Parsons and Shils, eds, *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 45–275.

players. In other words, numbers and power ratios are linked to unintended consequences or unplanned, ‘blind’ processes.²⁴

Here are some of the insights that the game models connect with each other:

- That power is always *relative*, always a ratio, and a ubiquitous aspect of *every* link in the chains of human interdependences, at every level from face-to-face encounters all the way to international relations and global power.
- That the more complex and extensive the webs of interdependence, and the more relatively even the power ratios within them, the more the interweaving of numerous people’s plans and intentions gives rise to consequences that no one has planned or intended:

‘From plans arising, yet unplanned

By purpose moved, yet purposeless’²⁵

- That in consequence, what Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh has called ‘the attribution of blame as a means of orientation’ so frequently employed in the social sciences (and almost always in politics) is rarely appropriate²⁶
- That, in further consequence, the ‘methodological atomism’ implicit in much sociological vocabulary and in research techniques like opinion surveys is best avoided (a point Elias shares with the Frankfurt School)
- That, since human interweaving produces opaque networks and unforeseen outcomes, systems of belief, ideologies and emotional commitments are developed to make sense of what people partially perceive. This points onward to Elias’s comprehensive *sociological* theory of knowledge and the sciences – the

²⁴ Stephen Mennell, “‘Individual Action’ and its ‘Social’ Consequences in the Work of Elias’, in P.R.

Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (eds), *Human Figurations: Essays for Norbert Elias* (Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift, 1977), pp. 99–109.

²⁵ Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 10]), p. 62.

²⁶ Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, ‘Attribution of blame as the past and present means of orientation: the social sciences as a potential improvement’, <http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/network/essays.php>. (The text cited here is derived from the typescript of the author’s own English translation, 1977. The essay was first published in Dutch as ‘De schuldvraag als oriëntatiemiddel’, in *De Gids*, 141 (1978), pp. 638–60, and reprinted in Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, *De staat van geweld en andere essays* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1980), pp. 7–46. A shortened version was published in English in Raymond Apthorpe and Andras Krahl (eds), *Development Studies: Critique and Renewal* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), pp. 109–35.)

basis of that Richard Kilminster has called a ‘post-philosophical sociology’ – a theory that I consider at least as important as Elias’s better known theory of civilising processes.

All this is to be found encapsulated in the game models. Yet one reviewer spoke of the ‘tired old analogy between social interaction and games’, as if Elias had not gone miles further than Erving Goffman.

When I eventually met Elias in person, I felt within minutes that here I was dealing with a vastly more powerful sociological mind than Talcott Parsons. Yet at the time, he was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world beyond the circle of those who knew him personally. That is not surprising, because his *magnum opus*, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had not yet (largely through his own fault) been published in English, and it was before most of the huge flood of publications that eventually filled the 18 volumes of the *Collected Works*. *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had been published obscurely in German only two years after Parsons’s hugely influential *The Structure of Social Action*.²⁷ Eric Dunning once indulged in a bit of counter-historical speculation: how differently would sociology have developed if *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had been translated immediately and if, crucially, Talcott Parsons had been at the University of Leicester and Elias had been at Harvard? For established–outsiders relationships are just as pervasive in academia as they are in social life generally.²⁸

Through Elias, I met Eric Dunning and Richard Kilminster. In the early days, it often felt as though we were a minority of three *contra omnes* within British sociology. But soon I encountered many others. At Elias’s house in Leicester at New Year 1975, Barbara and I first met Joop and Maria Goudsblom. We soon became close friends, and I have often said that I learnt more about the ‘figural’ way of thinking from Joop than I did directly from Elias. My intellectual debts to Joop are too numerous for me to be able to list them here. In 1977 Joop, with Hermann Korte and Peter Gleichmann, edited a *Festschrift* for Elias on his eightieth birthday, presented at a conference in Aachen.²⁹ At the beginning of January 1980,

²⁷ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1937).

²⁸ Norbert Elias, ‘Scientific establishments’, in *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 14]), pp. 107–60.

²⁹ P. R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (eds), *Human Figurations: Essays for/Aufsätze für Norbert Elias*. Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift, 1977.

Eric and I followed this up by organising an astonishingly well attended conference in Balliol College, Oxford, the first in the Anglophone world devoted specifically to Elias's work. Through these and many subsequent gatherings, there took shape a large-scale worldwide network of social scientists, which has continued to grow in the quarter-century since Elias's death.³⁰

The consequence of my encounter with Elias early in my career was that, unlike almost everyone else, I read all the subsequent fads and fashions in sociological theory through the lens of Elias – symbolic interactionism, Heinz 57 varieties of phenomenology, the Frankfurt School, structuralism, post-structuralism, Foucault, Bourdieu, Bauman – and generally found them wanting. Of course I found useful ideas in all or most of them, but none of them offered so comprehensive a *theoretical–empirical* synthesis as did Elias. They didn't make so many *connections* between so many things. In particular, they did not offer much in the way of a theory of knowledge, because they generally outsourced their epistemology to the philosophers.

I particularly deprecate the tendency of 'social theory' to be seen as an inconsequential series of sets of concepts, each of which becomes briefly fashionable and which one takes up and then throws away.³¹ It is as if the pursuit of understanding about human society is like looking through a kaleidoscope. If the gaudy-coloured concepts do not seem to make everything clear, give the conceptual kaleidoscope another shake and hope that this time the system of mirrors will produce an intelligible pattern. I remember a young Exeter colleague who said he thought that Jean Baudrillard had finally cracked all the problems of sociology. Who now even remembers Baudrillard?

I have a particular dislike of ornamental sociology.³² By that I mean the invocation of various concepts from a variety of sources, often in a separate 'theory section', which then prove to have no bearing on the empirical research that follows: there is no hint of any deduction from axioms. It rather reminds me of the ornamental style of cookery that began

³⁰ Barbara Górnicka, Katie Liston and Stephen Menell, 'Twenty-five years on: Norbert Elias's intellectual legacy 1990–2015', *Human Figurations* 4: 3 (2015):

http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.3*?rgn=full+text

³¹ From a conference in the Netherlands in the late 1980s, I remember Peter Abell's comment on Anthony Giddens, who then seemed a sociological colossus: 'There is no theory of structuration – it merely re-describes the problem using different words'.

³² This is very similar to what Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner once called 'decorative sociology'; see their essay 'Decorative Sociology', *Sociological Review*, 48: 4 (2000), pp. 629–48.

with Jules Gouffé in the mid nineteenth century and lingered into the 1950s: pieces of meat were encased in aspic, in which were embedded slices of black truffle or other delicacies. Prince Philip once complained about always being served food ‘with bits on’.³³ The sociological equivalent is a pick-and-mix selection of conceptual slivers of Foucault, Bourdieu, Habermas, Bauman or various fashionable philosophers. But fundamentally the ornamentation is unconnected with the sustenance underneath.

5. Food

This brings me on to food, and to my book *All Manners of Food*, which at Joop Goudsblom’s invitation also became my Amsterdam doctoral thesis. When I started writing about food, most British sociologists regarded it as wildly eccentric of me. The same happened a bit earlier when Eric Dunning started writing about the sociology of rugby and soccer. The general view was that ‘*Real* men do social stratification’. (And one prominent British sociologist queried whether my research was sociology at all.)

I set out to *use* Elias’s ideas. To start with, I had little more than a hunch that it might be possible to do something with old cookery books similar to what Elias had done with old manners books. Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh was immediately enthusiastic about the idea. Given the crudity of my hunch, though, Elias himself was initially not especially encouraging – but he nonetheless gave me some useful pointers. As I read myself into the subject, my hunch was steadily refined. *On the Process of Civilisation* led me to look for evidence of a process of the ‘civilising of appetite’, while *The Court Society* alerted me to the role of the absolutist courts – especially in France – in the emergence of *haute cuisine*. It also became clear that cuisine, or culinary cultures, reflected the changing power ratios between social strata. That was especially true of the different trajectories of England and France in both their politics and their cuisine.

So my research on food history proved to be a successful example of retrodiction: inference from some general sociological insights leading one to look for evidence, historical evidence in this case. This is how the ramifications of the theory of civilising processes have been worked out and its scope extended to an astonishing range of topics. Elias himself wrote on, among other things: violence, war, sport, ageing and dying, time, work, art, music, poetry,

³³ See Roland Barthes, ‘Ornamental cuisine’, in *Mythologies* (London: Granada, 1973), pp. 78–80. Barthes did not show any understanding of the historical origins of the style, however; see Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 250–54.

utopias, the sciences, and the relations between the sexes. Subsequently, others have extended his thinking into many other fields, and beyond Europe. The latest books to arrive are *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia*, by three scholars at the Australian National University, an edited collection applying established–outsiders theory to the Palestinians, and Marta Bucholc’s *A Global Community of Self-Defense*.³⁴ Elias’s thinking has been taken up in history (especially by world historians, social historians and art historians), cultural studies, criminology, anthropology, archaeology, psychology, political science and International Relations.

All this is very much at odds with the compartmentalisation of specialisms in conventional sociology. A few years ago, when Robert van Krieken tried to persuade the International Sociological Association to allow us to establish a Figural Sociology section within it, ISA officials responded ‘Yes, but *what* do you study?’ When Robert replied, ‘Everything’, they shut the door.

6. Advocating Elias

In 1986–88 I spent two consecutive years on sabbatical, first at Oxford and then at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study at Wassenaar. My major project was writing a book explaining Elias’s work as whole.³⁵ Elias didn’t like me writing it. He said. ‘While I am alive, Stephen, I am the best person to explain my ideas’. I quietly disagreed, but didn’t dare say so. When the book was published, however, he was persuaded that ‘Perhaps it will do some good’. The last time I saw him, a week before setting off to a professorship in Australia, he gave me a copy of his new book, *Studien über die Deutschen*, inscribed ‘For Stephen, dass er Europa nicht vergesse’.³⁶ I didn’t forget: three and half years later I was back here, in UCD.

I thought at first that I was the first to import Elias into Ireland. But no, that honour

³⁴ Roderic Broadhurst, Thierry Bouhours and Brigitte Bouhours, *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Gabriele Rosenthal (ed.), *Etablierte und Aussenseiter zugleich* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2015); Marta Bucholc, *A Global Community of Self-Defense* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2015).

³⁵ Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). Paperback editions, with an Afterword, were published under the title *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* by Blackwell in 1992 and by UCD Press in 1998.

³⁶ Norbert Elias, *Studies on the Germans: Power Struggles and the development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013 [Collected Works, vol. 11]).

belongs to Tom Inglis, who already had a chapter entitled ‘The Irish civilising process’ in his classic book *Moral Monopoly*.³⁷ Steve Loyal learned his Elias later, in the long watches of the night, drinking with Eric Dunning.

Soon after I returned to Europe, Joop Goudsblom and Hermann Korte asked me to edit a newsletter, *Figurations*, for the Norbert Elias Stichting. The first issue was produced for the ISA World Congress of Sociology in Bielefeld in 1994, and it has come out twice a year ever since, with the help successively of Aoife Rickard Diamond, Katie Liston and Barbara Górnicka.

Steven Pinker, in his best-selling study of the long-term decline of violence in human society, asserted that ‘Norbert Elias is the most important thinker you have never heard of’.³⁸ Having spent a good deal of the last 40 years seeking to promote interest in Elias’s work and convince social scientists of its importance, I found that remark mildly discouraging. In fact, his ideas have attracted researchers in every continent, but they are still a minority taste, and Elias’s thinking seems to appeal especially to people working in the interstices between conventional disciplines rather than in their central territories. And, above all, recognition in the United States has been very slow in coming. In a witty email to Chris Rojek a few years ago, Alan Sica summarised why:

The reason Americans don’t take to Elias is that he writes about European historical and cultural change and American sociologists don’t feel comfortable with that sort of thing, except for [Jack] Goldstone and that small lot; and because he is theoretically very adventurous and synthetic, and they don’t go for that; and because he trashed Parsons, who many of them liked back in the day; and because he could be mistaken for a closet Freudian, which they don’t like; and because he brings up really obnoxious qualities of humankind, which they particularly don’t like; and because he wrote a helluva lot of stuff, which takes a long time to read, they don’t have time; and because ‘figuration’ is a word that has a distinctly effete connotations in this country,

³⁷ Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987); revised and enlarged edition, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998).

³⁸ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 59n.

and sounds like art history ...³⁹

The sheer volume of Elias's writings is certainly a problem. They present a comprehensive synthesis equal in ambition to Parsons's, but on more secure *theoretical–empirical* foundations; you have to read the empirical evidence – the theory cannot be summarised in a few basic concepts.

Yet I think there is a deeper reason for Americans being relatively unreceptive to Elias: American individualism. I was struck by a recent comment by the writer Hari Kunzru in the *Guardian*. Now based in the USA, Kunzru remarked that 'Americans are culturally averse to any explanation not based on the feelings and doings of the sovereign individual.'⁴⁰ And I think this cultural trait can be seen in American sociology too; few American sociologists seem able to escape the trap of the individual/society, agency/structure and macro/micro dichotomies. Richard Kilminster and I are planning to write an article on '*Homo clausus* as a total ideology', looking at how, in Mannheim's sense of 'total ideology', individualism (including in its latest manifestation, neo-liberal economics) permeates American society and sociology – and, in consequence, much of the rest of the world. It makes more *sociological* insights unthinkable. Extreme examples include the common view that the constant instances of gun violence are to be explained by individual psychology

³⁹ Quoted in Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 44.

⁴⁰ Hari Kunzru, 'People have talked of a post-racial America ever since I moved here. It still hasn't happened', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2015. This cultural trait has a long history and it is related, through the Enlightenment assumptions of the Founding Fathers, with the central presuppositions of Western philosophical epistemology. The preoccupation with the false question of how 'the individual' knows what the individual knows was lampooned by Elias:

There is an obvious way of escape from the impasse where, for centuries, transcendental philosophers have found themselves trapped. That way, however, is closed to them. They cannot use it without losing their identity. They are like people enclosed in a room from which they try to escape. They try to unlock the windows, but the windows resist. They climb up the chimney, but the chimney is blocked. Yet the door is not locked; it is open all the time. If they only knew it, they could easily leave the room. But they cannot open the door, because to do so would disagree with the rules of the game which they as philosophers have set themselves. They cannot open the door, because that would not be philosophical. (Elias, 'Scientific establishments', pp. 117–18)

It would also be un-American.

rather than the prevalence of gun ownership, or the insistence that terrorism is the work of ‘bad people’ unrelated to the outcomes of American foreign policy and militarism.

7. Politics

One aspect of my intellectual life has not been mentioned thus far – politics. I have taken a keen interest in politics since I started reading the *Daily Herald* at the age of six. I have been a city councillor, and in the middle of writing *All Manners of Food* I stood for parliament – unsuccessfully, thank goodness. Elias did not approve: ‘Stephen, your work is more important’ – but he added that, if I were elected, he looked forward to coming to tea on the terrace of House of Commons. I wasn’t, and he didn’t.

Figurational sociologists are not much known for policy-related research or political interventions. Part of Elias’s theory of knowledge and the sciences is his discussion of the problems of involvement and detachment,⁴¹ and Eliasians have a reputation for striving for relative detachment. Actually, it doesn’t have very much to do with conscious individual striving. Elias’s point is that a relatively high degree of safety and security in everyday life is necessary for the decline of ‘magical–mythical thinking’ and for people to become emotionally capable of making the ‘detour via detachment’ necessary for the ‘relatively detached’ pursuit of scientific knowledge. He deplored the low level of detachment that pervaded sociology in many countries, including in Britain, where the British Sociological Association often resembled the research department of the Labour Party. This is probably one reason for the almost total failure of sociology to penetrate the thinking of the public at large,⁴² who still tend to think in psychologistic terms, seeking explanations for social events in individual motivations. Another reason is that ‘social theory’ long since disappeared up its own fundament. Sociology’s failure in the public realm is especially noticeable in Ireland, where, for comment on current events, the media are less likely to call on sociologists than on historians, philosophers or even literary critics.⁴³

⁴¹ Norbert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]).

⁴² There are a few exceptions, cases where sociological jargon has entered the language. An example is ‘unintended consequences’, but, devoid of its wider theoretical context, that term carries little insight into social processes.

⁴³ Bryan Fanning, in *The Quest for Modern Ireland: The Battle of Ideas 1912–1986* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), especially pp. 132–33, argues that the Roman Catholic church’s ‘clerical sociology’ stymied the development of the subject in Ireland, because of its aversion to theory (for example theories that examined

Yet, for all that they are seen as broadly apolitical, figurational sociologists seem to occupy a specific area of the political spectrum. I can't be sure that they are unanimous, but their views seem to congregate in the European social democrat part of the spectrum. I suspect the reason for this is their understanding of interdependence and its connection with balances of power, and how these are connected in turn with people's emotions and their perceptions of the world. Though most of them seem to eschew public controversy, I increasingly believe that is a pity, because they have insights to contribute to public discourse.

Moreover, it is a mistake to think that Elias disapproved of all forms of involvement. Yes, one had to make the 'detour via detachment', but then he envisaged the possibility of 'secondary involvement' (or, better, 'secondary *re*-involvement' as Steve Quilley calls it).⁴⁴ In recent years, many younger figurationists have applied Elias to policy-related research – but always with a long-term, historical and processual perspective. On a larger canvass, Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh and now Andrew Linklater have shown the relevance of Elias to international relations.⁴⁵ I myself have indulged in a bit of secondary re-involvement. I would mention my recent essay 'Explaining American hypocrisy', in which I apply established-outsiders theory to American meddling in Ukraine. Since finishing my book *The American Civilizing Process*,⁴⁶ I have paid more attention to American foreign policy and militarism, notably in the Middle East. The failure of American interventions and the consequent destabilisation of the entire Middle East seems to me to stem from a failure to understand a basic point of Elias – that day-to-day safety comes before pretty well everything else, and high levels of fear and danger in everyday life have profound *decivilising* effects on

religion as a mere social fact). Theory was problematic but narrow empiricism proved acceptable. See also Bryan Fanning and Andreas Hess, *Sociology in Ireland: A Short History* (London: Palgrave, 2015), which describes the dominant status of ESRI/Nuffield College empirical sociology over a weaker university-based 'interpretative sociology'.

⁴⁴ Elias, *Involvement and Detachment*, pp. 59, 66, 71. See also Richard Kilminster, 'From distance to detachment: knowledge and self-knowledge in Elias's theory of involvement and detachment', in Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley (eds.), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 25–41

⁴⁵ Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). This is the first of a projected trilogy: the second volume is now in press.

⁴⁶ Stephen Menell, *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

people's habitus.⁴⁷ The denizens of Foggy Bottom need to read, learn and above all inwardly digest *On the Process of Civilisation!*

Conclusion

Let me end by looking back on my career. Do I have any regrets? Yes, there are too many projects that I have not finished. (In that, I am once more following Norbert Elias's model.) Still worse, there were good ideas that I never even began to pursue. Years ago, I thought of writing a book with the title *The Spirit of Accountancy, and How it Buggered Up Britain*. Or there was the article that Bryan Turner and I intended to write, called 'On the inadequacy of garbage disposal procedures in sociology'. More seriously, I wish it had not been quite such an uphill struggle to get a hearing for Elias's ideas; the resistance we encountered helped to make us look too much like a sect whose members, to use John Lever's term, had 'taken the blood oath'. But that has also meant that I made so many close and life-long friends in many countries, who have supported each other through thick and thin. One of the most remarkable features of what Jason Hughes labelled 'the figurati' is that the research network they formed has been held together by commensality, also known as drinking together, over four decades. Even more remarkable, as Ademir Gebara has pointed out, is that we have not had the splits and schisms that often afflicted other social scientific traditions.

I want to thank everyone who has taken the time, trouble and expense to come to this conference: I am deeply honoured. I am especially grateful to Tom Inglis, Steve Loyal and the UCD School of Sociology for taking this initiative. And to Katie Liston, and to brand-new Dr Barbara Górnicka who has done so much to make the conference happen, even while submitting her PhD thesis and coming through her viva!

⁴⁷ A similar failure of understanding underpins the inability of the US to monopolise the means of violence *within* its own territory. For an Eliasian interpretation of this, see Pieter Spierenburg, 'Democracy came too early: a tentative explanation for the problem of American homicide', *American Historical Review*, 111: 1 (2006), pp. 104–14.