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Elias and Popper

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Norbert Elias hated Karl Popper. He hated him with an intensity that in most people would indicate some *personal* animosity arising from some unpleasant face-to-face encounter. Yet, although they may indeed have met each other, possibly at the London School of Economics in the late 1940s after Popper returned from his wartime refuge in New Zealand, I wonder whether Popper was even aware of Elias. Elias never mentioned having met Popper, and there is no correspondence between them in the Elias archive at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar. No, so far as I can tell, Elias’s intense dislike was purely on intellectual grounds.

One cold day in Leicestershire, January 1975

I discovered Elias’s dislike of Popper in a dramatic way. It was the beginning of January 1975, not very long after I first met Elias. My wife Barbara and I, along with Joop and Maria Goudsblom (whom we had met for the first time the day before) were walking back with Elias from a country pub in Leicestershire, where we had had lunch. At this time, I knew relatively little of Elias’s writings. I had translated *Was ist Soziologie?*, but hardly anything else of what Elias had written in German had yet appeared in English. Elias was indeed still writing the series of essays on the sociology of knowledge and the sciences, and though he had given a seminar paper on Popper at Leicester in 1971, it was only published in 1985 (and then in German translation). And, unlike Richard Kilminster, I had not at this stage had much discussion with Elias about his sociology of knowledge and the sciences.

As we walked through freezing fog to a rural bus stop, I had one of my first experiences of Elias’s practice of peripatetic sociology. He and Joop and I fell into

¹ Parts of this paper are based on the Notes on the text to volumes 14 and 18 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias in English, which I co-authored with Richard Kilminster and Katie Liston respectively.

conversation about theories of science. I ventured to remark that perhaps the gulf between Norbert's views and at least the later work of Karl Popper was not so great. There was a huge eruption from Norbert. This was the first time I saw him 'go nuclear'. He was most offended.²

How could I have been so naïve? That requires a bit of background. As a student in Cambridge in the mid-1960s, I had been taught by John Goldthorpe, who was a Popper enthusiast, and who a few years earlier in Leicester had been the principal spokesman of what for shorthand we may call the 'positivist opposition' to Elias.³ I had for a time shared Goldthorpe's enthusiasm. But as a postgraduate and young lecturer, even before my encounter with Elias, I had been keenly interested in questions of long-term social development. I was already worried about the increasing hodiecentrism of modern sociology, or what Elias was later to call 'the retreat of sociologists into the present'.⁴ And Popper's writings, which had an immense influence in British sociology at the time, powerfully justified the retreat from the sociological study of history.

In his 1957 Preface to *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper advances a highly simplified refutation (as he sees it) of what he calls 'historicism'.⁵ It runs as follows:

The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge. ... We cannot predict ... the future growth of scientific knowledge. ... We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history. ...

This is a trite and trivial argument – the sort of argument that brings philosophers into disrepute. But the book's dedication was:

² For an account of my relations with Elias from the early 1960s until his death, see Stephen Mennell, 'Elias and the Counter-ego', *History of the Human Sciences*, 19: 2 (2006), pp. 73–91.

³ It was in direct response to Goldthorpe's advocacy of Popper against Elias in conversation with Eric Dunning at a sociological gathering that Dunning wrote his careful 'Eliasian' critique of Popper; see Dunning, '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.

⁴ 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. 107–26.

⁵ Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. v–vi.

In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny.⁶

That echoed Popper's influential earlier work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, a two-volume critique principally of Plato and Marx – seen as providing the foundations for totalitarian regimes – but more broadly an attack on dialectics, psychoanalysis, sociological holism and anything like 'laws of history', with sideswipes at Hegel⁷ and Elias's mentor Karl Mannheim.⁸ But later, around the time of the great controversies arising from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Popper seemed to have shifted his ground and to have advanced what he called an 'evolutionary' theory of the growth of scientific knowledge.

When I provoked Elias on our cold trudge through the Leicestershire countryside, it was this most recent book of Popper's, *Objective Knowledge*, that I had in mind.⁹ I assumed that Elias's chief objection to Popper's philosophy was the obstacle it sought to put in the way of the investigation of long-term developmental processes. And indeed, in *What is Sociology?* Elias had devoted a whole chapter to 'The problem of the "inevitability" of social development'.¹⁰ There, Elias draws an essential distinction 'between that which is inevitable in the sense that all conditions necessary for its existence have been met, and that which is inevitable in the sense that all other possibilities have been ruled out'.¹¹ The crucial argument is as follows:

A development may be represented schematically as a series of vectors

⁶ Ibid., p. iii.

⁷ See Walter Kaufmann's demolition of Popper's treatment of Hegel, 'The Hegel Myth and its Method', in *From Shakespeare to Existentialism: Studies in Poetry, Religion and Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 88–119. Discussing Popper with me in a conversation in Bielefeld in 1981 or 1982, Elias said that although Hegel often expressed himself in what now seems a ridiculous way, he was actually struggling with real and important questions concerning human social development – which Popper was not.

⁸ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1945).

⁹ Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?*, enlarged edn (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 5]), pp. 153–70.

¹¹ Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1982), p. 145.

$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D$. Here the letters represent various figurations of people, each figuration flowing from the previous one as the development takes its course from A to D. Retrospective study will often clearly show not only that the figuration at C is a necessary precondition for D, and likewise B for C and A for B, but also why this is so. Yet, looking into the future, from whatever point in the figurational flow, we are usually able to establish only that the figuration at B is one possible transformation of A, and similarly, C of B and D of C. In other words, in studying the flow of figurations there are two possible perspectives on the connection between one figuration chosen from the continuing flow and another, later, figuration. From the viewpoint of the earlier figuration, the later is – in most if not in all cases – only one of several possibilities for change. From the viewpoint of the later figuration, the earlier one is usually a necessary condition for the formation of the later.¹²

It is that insight that justifies Elias's study of *the structure of processes* and their 'sequential order'. And, even if it does not make possible perfect predictions about future developments, it does help to show that certain outcomes are more or less likely than others. What a contrast with the sheer crudity of Popper's thinking!

Yet, in retrospect, it looks as though Elias's principal objection to Popper was not after all the encouragement he gave to the retreat of sociologists into the present. When I recently looked up the catalogue of books that Elias had in his personal library, I was astonished to find that he seems not to have owned a copy of *The Open Society*, nor of *Conjectures and Refutations*¹³ – though of course that does not prove that he had not read them. He did have a copy of the 1957 edition of *The Poverty of Historicism*. And, interestingly, in the list there appears the 1975 reprint of *Objective Knowledge* – which means that he bought the copy *after* I had provoked him by praising it and saying that Popper's later views were not so very different from his own.

The Logic of Scientific Discovery

The book by Popper to which Elias paid greatest attention was *The Logic of Scientific*

¹² Elias, *What is Sociology?*, p. 156.

¹³ K. R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).

Discovery.¹⁴ Note that the version in his library was the belated English translation of 1959, *not* the original German edition that had been published as far back as 1934. Strangely, Elias's essay 'On the creed of a nominalist' is a critique of very early Popper, not of his more influential writings of the 1950s and 1960s. It shows that Elias's concern was more fundamentally with Popper's epistemology, his model of science, and his famous principle of falsifiability. Elias sets out a scathing critique, a total rejection of Popper's entire endeavour.¹⁵

In 'On the creed of a nominalist', Elias depicts Popper as a representative of the out-of-date tradition of Western transcendental philosophy, a hangover from a previous age when untestable, uncheckable, timeless truths were the stock-in-trade of authoritative priests and theologians. Elias essentially opposes Popper's philosophy of knowledge with a version of the sociology of knowledge. But Elias noticeably does not mention either Popper's well-known critique of the sociology of knowledge,¹⁶ nor does he even mention the political and moral impetus of much of Popper's work in the context of totalitarianism. Elias sidesteps polemics of that kind and consistently sticks to fundamentals, as he sees them.

For Elias, Popper's theory embraces an idealised model of a universal science based on classical physics, and is presented in an obscure, abstract language, not amenable to testing. Popper's enquiries are reductionist, speculative, non-empirical, individualistic and, ultimately, metaphysical and arbitrary. Popper is not interested in how scientists actually proceed, but only in how they *ought* to proceed, on the basis of the idealised model. And like all philosophers, Popper relies entirely upon the traditional authority of the philosophers' establishment to provide credibility for his transcendental statements. Characteristically, in the course of his critique of Popper, Elias demolishes the Kantian *a priori* yet again (as he had been doing since his Breslau doctorate of 1922¹⁷); he questions the cornerstone of Popper's approach, the centrality of logic; and he finds in Popper the age-old fallacy of nominalism, as well the self-deluding egocentricity so typical of the influence of *homo*

¹⁴ K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), first published as *Logik der Forschung* (Vienna, Springer, 1934).

¹⁵ The next seven paragraphs are based on the Note on the text to Elias, *Essays I*, written jointly by Richard Kilminster and me. We received great help from Artur Bogner in clarifying the issues involved in the debate between Elias and Hartmut Esser.

¹⁶ Popper, *Open Society*, II, pp. 212–23.

¹⁷ Norbert Elias, 'Idea and individual: a critical investigation of the concept of history', in *Early Writings* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2006 [Collected Works, vol. 1]), pp. 5–21.

clausus.¹⁸ Elias champions Comte¹⁹ as a pioneer of a dynamic theory of science (as opposed to the static theory of Popper) which has the potential to show how science developed out of pre-scientific origins and enables us to understand *advances* in knowledge.

When first published in German,²⁰ this essay provoked a reply by the sociologist Hartmut Esser,²¹ which in turn drew forth a rejoinder by Elias.²² Elias's rejoinder was in fact the continuation of an exchange between the two that had effectively begun previously.³⁶ The publication of Elias's original critique of Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* was probably a reaction to an earlier, longer, article by Hartmut Esser in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* specifically devoted to a discussion of Elias's methodology and comparing it with Popper's 'methodological individualism'.²³ In this article Esser had already criticised Elias's belief that his own methodology was incompatible with the principles of 'methodological individualism' (a term used by Esser also to include authors such as Raymond Boudon and other 'rational choice' theorists). Both methodologies, he argued, shared the principle that societies and social figurations consisted of nothing but interdependent individuals, and both searched for explanations in the form of process models, particularly models of unplanned processes. Also, both schools of sociology shared a clear emphasis on the *unintended* consequences of the actions of individuals and a tendency to construct models of social processes as blind, unintended processes. In effect, Esser had argued that Elias was more or less a methodological individualist anyway. Elias's opposition to Popper's 'methodological individualism' resulted largely, Esser continued, from misunderstandings that were unnecessary and rather difficult to comprehend.

¹⁸ *Homo clausus* (closed person): the image of the person that Elias argues tacitly underlies much of Western philosophy, an image of single human beings each of whom is ultimately absolutely independent of all others – an individual-in-himself; Elias reconceptualises human beings as *homines aperti* (open people, in the plural). See *What is Sociology?*, pp. 114–17; *On the Process of Civilisation* pp. 512–26.

¹⁹ As he also does in *What is Sociology?*: see chapter 1, 'Sociology: the questions framed by Comte', pp. 7–45.

²⁰ Elias, 'Das Credo eines Metaphysikers: Kommentare zur Poppers *Logik der Forschung*', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 14: 2 (1985), pp. 93–114.

²¹ Hartmut Esser, 'Logik oder Metaphysik der Forschung', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 14: 4 (1985), pp. 257–64.

²² Elias, 'Science or sciences: contribution to a debate with reality-blind philosophers', in *Essays I*, pp. 191–211, originally published as 'Wissenschaft oder Wissenschaften? Beitrag zu einer Diskussion mit wirklichkeitsblinden Philosophen', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 14: 4 (1985), pp. 268–81.

²³ Hartmut Esser, 'Figurationssoziologie und methodologischer Individualismus: Zur Methodologie des Ansatzes von Morbert Elias', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 36: 4 (1984), pp. 667–702.

In his counter-critique, Esser claimed that Elias had not understood the basic principles of Popper's theory of science, including the fundamental difference between 'genesis' and 'validity' (*Geltung*), and therefore the fundamental difference between the subject matter of a 'theory of science' and that of a sociology (or history) of science. Elias, Esser argued, had not understood that the prescriptive nature of a 'theory of science' made it different from any empirical discipline. How scientists actually behave in the empirical world cannot determine how they *ought* to behave. According to Esser, Elias had also misunderstood and exaggerated the significance attributed by Popper to the role of deductive inference in relation to role of the empirical examination of theories. He therefore underrated the relevance of empirical testing, and misinterpreted Popper's demand for a strictly logical–deductive mode of constructing theories and hypotheses as a retreat into the world of 'pure' relationships, while in actual fact this demand was, and is, only a necessary condition for any rigorous empirical checking of theories. Thus, Esser argued, Elias wrongly imputed to his opponent an ontological denial of the existence of a real world, whereas Popper actually claims a 'realist' position for himself.²⁴ In this way, Elias arrived at a caricature of Popper's critical rationalism and overlooked the fact that almost all of his own methodological principles were essentially shared by critical rationalists.²⁵ For example, the demand for 'detachment' or 'value-neutrality'; the rejection of an unbridgeable gap between the research methods of the natural and social sciences; the quest for explanations (in the sense of causal explanations) in the social sciences; the call for building a unifying theory in the social and cultural sciences; and the demand for 'objectivity' or intersubjective comprehensibility. There was also a second, not dissimilar, reply to Elias's critique of Popper from Hans Albert.²⁶

In his rejoinder, 'Science or sciences: contribution to a debate with reality-blind philosophers', Elias repeated much of his original critique of Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. He comments on briefly on Esser and Albert's replies. They had both said that Elias had misunderstood Popper. It is clear that there was no doubt at all in Elias's mind that he had understood Popper perfectly well. He effectively agrees to disagree with Popper's defenders because, for Elias, they are making the same outdated assumptions about the

²⁴ Esser, 'Figurationssoziologie', pp. 695–6.

²⁵ For further clarification of this feature of Elias's thought, see Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-philosophical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 24–9.

²⁶ Hans Albert, 'Mißverständnisse eines Kommentators', *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 14: 4 (1985), pp. 265–7.

autonomy of philosophy that he, Elias, does not accept.

The discussion is thus dominated by Elias's uncompromising rejection of transcendental philosophising of any kind, which he regarded as a hangover from pre-modern times. He refuses to accept the philosophers' authority to pass judgements on scientific procedure and the limits of knowledge. This refusal is consistent with Elias's diagnosis of the conduct of philosophers as representatives of a powerful scientific establishment. His response is not to allow the philosophers to dictate the vocabulary and assumptions of the argument, in this case on the status of a transcendental 'theory of science'. In short, Elias is not prepared to play the game according to the philosophers' rules, because in so doing one unwittingly reinforces their authority.

Elias's antipathy towards the perpetuation of this philosophical tradition of thought comes from the image of the human being as *homo clausus* that it embodies. All forms of apriorism (including that of Popper and his followers) assume that human *individuals* can tragically never know the world as it really is (Kant's thing-in-itself). Hence these philosophers are, as Elias provocatively puts it, 'reality-blind'. For Elias, apriorisms of any kind fly in the face of the 'reality-adequacy' of a great deal of the human knowledge that has *already* enabled humans collectively to survive and become masters of their planet. Had that knowledge not been relatively adequate to various aspects and levels of the natural and social worlds, humans would never have come this far. Furthermore, doubt and defeatism are cast over the entire scientific endeavour by transcendental philosophers' assumption that the regularities people discover *in the world* are only regularities that they think they find *within themselves as individuals*. This image of humans implies that they can never be certain whether they can ever develop the adequate knowledge of the world which they so vitally need, as a species, in order to survive together into the future.²⁷

The sociogenesis of logic: Lévy-Bruhl and Aristotle

Elias argues that at the centre his objections to the philosophy of Popper is the universal status of logic,⁴³ which Popper, as a transcendental philosopher, takes for granted. Popper's assumption of a single eternal logic of science, a logic which moreover demarcates science from non-science, is for Elias another species of the fallacious Kantian *a priori*. It is the

²⁷ Elias argued against apriorism and Cartesian doubt for a final time in the very last piece that he was working on only two days before he died, the Introduction to *The Symbol Theory* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2011 [Collected Works, vol. 13]), pp. 1–16; see also the Note on the text, pp. xx–xxi.

assumption of unlearned categories (for example, logic) innate in all humans that leads to the view that there is a single science, represented by classical physics, a single scientific method, a quantifying one, which legitimates research as scientific irrespective of the subject matter of the science itself. Elias then opposes this form of the *a priori* with his own view of the way in which the ‘objects’ of the different *sciences* (in the plural) have arisen, based on his theory of levels of integration, which he sets out in several essays, such as ‘The sciences: towards a theory’.²⁸

It was absolutely central to Elias’s thinking that ‘logic’ was not something timeless and eternal. It too underwent processes of sociogenesis. This can be seen most clearly in an essay that has not been published in French, on ‘Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and “the question of the logical unity of humankind”’.²⁹ Lévy-Bruhl has tended to be pilloried by Anglophone scholars, especially anthropologists, especially over his use of the term ‘pre-logical’ to describe patterns of thought in non-Western, pre-industrial societies (which he himself regretted). But Elias was sympathetic to his work. He started writing about it in the early to mid-1960s, and my guess is that he did so in response to his reading of Popper’s *Logic* after its publication in English in 1959. This essay dates from the early to mid-1960s, and was never published in Elias’s lifetime. Elias had formed plans to reissue two of Lévy-Bruhl’s books, *How Natives Think* and *Primitive Mentality*, in the series he edited for the London publisher Frank Cass,³⁰ with substantial introductions by himself. As was so common with Elias, the Introduction became longer and longer, until Frank Cass said he was not keen on publishing books where the Introduction was bigger than the text of the book itself. Then Elias said he planned to write a whole book on French sociology, covering Comte and Durkheim as well as Lévy-Bruhl. But that too remained unfinished.

How Natives Think was to have been published under the more acceptable and accurate title of *Patterns of Thinking*. Probably the title *Primitive Mentality* would have been

²⁸ Elias, ‘The sciences: towards a theory’, in *Essays I*, pp. 66–84.

²⁹ Norbert Elias, ‘Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and “the question of the logical unity of humankind”’, in *Supplements and Index to the Collected Works* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2014 [Collected Works, vol. 18]), pp. 53–136; see also Stephen Mennell and Katie Liston, ‘Introduction: Elias, Freud and Lévy-Bruhl’, *ibid.*, pp. 1–12. The essay was given its published title by the editors of the volume; the phrase ‘the question of the logical unity of [hu]mankind’ is taken from Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).

³⁰ The series included Elias and John L. Scotson’s *The Established and the Outsiders* (London: Frank Cass, 1965; rev. edn *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 2008), Eric Dunning (ed.), *The Sociology of Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), and Colin Bell and Howard Newby (eds), *The Sociology of Community* (London: Frank Cass, 1974).

changed too, because elsewhere Elias makes clear that he does not like the term ‘primitive’: ‘I would not use the word “primitive”; I do not like it – “simpler” is the right word, in the sense of “less differentiated”.’³¹ Even the term ‘simpler’ is now often frowned upon as disparaging, but Elias uses it in a sense relating to the size and *structure* of the social group, not to the mental capacity of members of the group. After Hitler, any implication that any group of people were innately inferior to others had to be rejected very firmly.

Yet, as Elias argues in great detail in his essay on Lévy-Bruhl, despite the Frenchman’s unfortunate choice of terminology, he was not at all arguing for any form of innate inferiority. By ‘pre-logical’, he meant something purely technical and innocuous to do with the rules of formal, rational logic – that is, the lack of a ‘law of contradiction’ in the thought of people in small-scale pre-industrial groups. Their collective representations violated the rule with impunity. Lévy-Bruhl’s argument was grounded not in anything ‘innate’, but rather in the scale of the stock of knowledge available to human beings in different societies at different periods of human history and pre-history. That was why certain patterns of thinking for which Lévy-Bruhl coined the term ‘pre-logical’ were proportionately more pervasive in many of the small-scale, tribal or pre-industrial societies studied mainly by anthropologists than in advanced scientific–industrial societies that are the domain mainly of sociologists. Elias himself was to use the term ‘magical–mythical’, and stressed that such patterns of thinking are by no means absent in the later and larger-scale societies, although in fields such as science and technology they are subject to stronger social constraint than in, for example, religion.³² There is thus a clear connection between Lévy-Bruhl’s writings and Elias’s own developmental theory of knowledge and the sciences. Neither Lévy-Bruhl nor Elias doubted that, were it possible for a human baby born in the Stone Age to be magically transported into the twentieth century, it would grow up with the same intellectual capacities, intelligence and emotional habitus as a child born into the industrial age. The difference between the two ages was not in innate intelligence but in the amount of reliable knowledge accumulated over many generations. To think otherwise, Elias noted, would be equivalent to believing that the theory of relativity could have been as easily discovered by Albertus

³¹ Elias, *Interviews*, p. 131.

³² See, notably, Elias’s essay ‘The fishermen in the maelstrom’, in *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]), pp. 105–78, as well as the essays collected in *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 14]).

Magnus in the Middle Ages as by Albert Einstein early in the twentieth century.³³ That much Lévy-Bruhl and Elias had in common. Elias's crucial addition was his emphasis on the relation between the relative security of everyday life and the capacity to undertake the 'detour via detachment' necessary for the growth of the stock of reliable knowledge.³⁴ And the security and calculability of everyday life was closely bound up with the processes of state formation, internal pacification and monopolisation of the means of violence (and taxation) that Elias described in *On the Process of Civilisation*.³⁵ Moreover, Elias contended, insecure societies foster a different pattern of emotion management. In the course of development towards modern internally relatively pacified societies, there comes about greater all-round self-restraint, which goes hand-in-hand with the capacity to distinguish unequivocally between what is living and non-living. These long-term processes – whether of state formation, conscience and habitus formation and changes in emotion management, or the accumulation of relatively detached knowledge – are not 'inevitable', and they can and do go into reverse especially in the short term; but they all involve a degree of 'sequential order', in which some things cannot happen before others have happened.

Elias at first skirts the anthropological debates, and goes into a long discussion of Aristotle.³⁶ As Elias commented elsewhere, quoting Alfred Weber, 'every historian knew that the modes of thought of the Greeks and other ancient peoples, and quite generally the categorial apparatus of simpler peoples, differed from our own'.³⁷ And, since it has been a long-established assumption that Aristotle marks the beginning of systematic logic and science in the West, it was important to show that Aristotle's and other Greek philosophers' 'patterns of thinking' are not quite the same as those found in the modern era. This point finally makes clear how closely Elias's reflections on Lévy-Bruhl are connected to the central arguments of Elias's sociological theory of knowledge and the sciences. The 'question of the logical unity of humankind' underlies Elias's savage critique of the philosophy of Sir Karl Popper, who contended that philosophers could define a single eternal 'logic of scientific

³³ Elias, *Essays I*, p. 32.

³⁴ Elias, 'Problems of involvement and detachment', in *Involvement and Detachment*, pp. 68–104.

³⁵ Elias, *On the Process*, Part 3.

³⁶ This may be regarded as a shrewd tactic, because both classics and philosophy are the disciplines of long standing and high prestige in the British – and more generally European – university system; they constitute 'established' academic groups in contrast to such latecomer outsider groups as sociology. See Elias, 'Scientific establishments', in *Essays I*, pp. 107–60.

³⁷ Elias, *Interviews*, p. 38.

discovery', which at all stages of the development of human society could serve to draw a sharp distinction between 'science' and 'non-science'. Elias would have none of that.

Conclusion

In short, Elias's antipathy to Popper seems not primarily to stem from Popper's anti-historicism, the prestige of which served to encourage 'the retreat of sociologists into the present'. It stemmed rather from a fundamental objection to Popper's epistemology and the idea of falsification as a rigid criterion of the difference between 'science' and 'non-science'. But since the belief in a *single* eternal logic of science served to foster 'physic envy' among social scientists, it brings us back to present-centred, unprocessual sociology in the end.