University College Dublin

Humanities Institute of Ireland

Workshop on Norbert Elias

10.30–12.30
10 February 2011
Introduction

‘Who knows only his own generation remains always a child,’ said Cicero. That can serve as a motto for the work of the celebrated sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990), who strongly believed that sociologists’ central task is to help human beings to build a better future society – but that they can only do so if they have a thorough understanding of the dynamics of the long-term processes through which human society has come to be what it is today. Although he is most famous (and controversial) for his theory of civilising processes, Elias wrote on a wide variety of topics, from art through science to sport and violence. He developed a very distinctive ‘processual’ approach to sociology, which involves rejecting many of the most familiar concepts in conventional sociology, such as ‘individual’ versus ‘society’ and ‘agency’ versus ‘structure’. Elias was not a conventional ‘social theorist’ – he believed that ‘theory’ was only valid and valuable if it led to interesting and useful empirical research, and empirical research was only interesting and useful if it fed back into improving theory. Or, as he himself put it, ‘improving the means of orientation’ – human understanding of human society.

Elias’s fame is peculiar in two respects: first, that he became an intellectual celebrity only in the last ten or fifteen years of his very long life; and, second, that his work often appears to attract the attention less of his fellow sociologists than of scholars from around the world in disciplines in other areas of the humanities and social sciences – history, anthropology, psychology, political science, criminology, international relations, literature, music, art history – and especially from people whose research lies in the interstices between academic disciplines. Through them, Elias’s ideas have been extended in many and varied ways across a whole range of substantive topics.

Bibliography

The Collected Works of Norbert Elias in English

Norbert Elias’s Collected Works are currently being published by UCD Press in 18 volumes, eventually comprising:

1 Early Writings (2006)
2 The Court Society (2006)
3 On the Process of Civilisation (forthcoming 2012)
4 The Established and the Outsiders (2008)
5 What is Sociology? (forthcoming 2012)
6 The Loneliness of the Dying and Humana Conditio (2010)
7 Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process (2008)
8 Involvement and Detachment (2007)
10 The Society of Individuals (2010)
11 Studies on the Germans (forthcoming 2013)
12 Mozart and Other Essays on Courtly Art (2010)
13 The Symbol Theory (forthcoming 2011)
14 Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences (2010)
16 Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities (2009)
17 Autobiographical Essays and Interviews (forthcoming 2013)
18 Appendices and Index to the Collected Works (forthcoming 2013)

Notes

1 Volumes 14–16 are especially valuable, since they bring together nearly all of Elias’s essays, which were previously widely scattered and not always easy to obtain; many of them were not previously published in English, and a few had never been published before. Two other essays, on Watteau and on German Baroque poetry, are included with the essay on Mozart in volume 12, and volumes 4 and 7 also include previously unpublished essays.

2 Elias wrote both in German and in English. All the works that he wrote in English have now been published in German translation, in the Gesammelte Schriften published in 19 volumes by Suhrkamp. Volume 18 in the Suhrkamp series contains Elias’s poetry, which we are not attempting to publish in English translation.

3 Earlier editions of Elias’s books in English were often riddled with errors, so it is preferable to use the heavily corrected Collected Works editions whenever possible. The main gap in the series so far is Elias’s magnum opus, The Civilizing Process, the new edition of which will be published under the more accurate title On the Process of Civilisation. Pending that, the best version is the revised (but still imperfect) one volume edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

4 Previous editions of other works by Elias that have not yet been published in the Collected Works are:

What is Sociology? (London: Hutchinson, 1978)


The Symbol Theory (London: Sage, 1991)


6 Selections from Elias’s writings can be found in:


Elias: Online Resources

A comprehensive listing not only of all Elias’s publications but also of all his unpublished
papers, which are lodged in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar, Germany, can be found in the HyperElias World Catalogue created by Professor Ingo Mörth at the University of Linz, Austria. It also includes much of the secondary literature on Elias. You can find it at: http://www.kuwi.uni-linz.ac.at/hyperelias/z-elias/

Some useful resources can also be found on the website of the Norbert Elias Foundation, Amsterdam: http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl.

Since 1994, the Norbert Elias Foundation has published a twice-yearly research newsletter entitled Figurations, which lists and reviews most publications (in most languages) relating to Elias. For current and past issues of Figurations, see either http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/figurations.php or the Norbert Elias and Process Sociology website (maintained by Professor Robert van Krieken, UCD/University of Sydney), at: http://elias-i.nfshost.com/

Secondary Sources


Goudsblom, Johan Sociology in the Balance: A Critical Essay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). [This is not an exposition of Elias’s work, but rather a brilliant critique of modern sociology from Elias’s standpoint; the empirical examples used are inevitably somewhat dated, but the critique itself remains very impressive.]

Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell (eds) Norbert Elias, 3 vols (Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought). London: Sage, 2003, 4 vols. [These volumes contain a collection of articles that are developments of and comments upon the work of Elias, not readings by Elias himself.]


Richard Kilminster Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007)
Critiques and Counter-critiques

Elias’s sociology has been vigorously criticized and no less stoutly defended. Here is a by no means comprehensive selection of some of the principal arguments.


A Selection of Major Contributions in the ‘Figurational’ or ‘Eliasian’ Research Tradition (in no particular order)

Maarten van Bottenburg: *Global Games* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002)

Eric Dunning: *Sport Matters* (London: Routledge, 1999)


Bram Kempers: *Painting, Power and Patronage* (London: Allen Lane, 1992)


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<tr>
<th>Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stephen Mennell</td>
<td>All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present</td>
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<td>Chris Rojek</td>
<td>Capitalism and Leisure Theory</td>
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<td>Abram de Swaan</td>
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<td>Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West, 1890–2000</td>
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