

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)
- 9 *An Essay on Time* (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)

- 15 *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity* (2009)
 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)

Reflections on a Life (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994) – to be included in volume 18.

The Symbol Theory (London: Sage, 1991)

The Germans (Cambridge, Polity, 1996) – to appear as vol. 11, *Studies on the Germans*.

5 See also: 'Le concept freudien de société et au-delà', in Norbert Elias, *Au-delà de Freud: sociologie, psychologie, psychanalyse* (Paris: Le Découverte, 2010) – English original will be included in vol. 18.

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

Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell (eds) *The Norbert Elias Reader: A Biographical Selection* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

Stephen Mennell and Johan Goudsblom (eds) *Elias, Norbert, On Civilization, Power and Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

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-1.nfshost.com/>

Secondary Sources

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| Stephen Menzell | <i>Norbert Elias: An Introduction</i> (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998) [Earlier editions were published by Blackwell: hardback, <i>Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image</i> in 1989, and the paperback edition with new afterword, <i>Norbert Elias: An Introduction</i> in 1992. For the purposes of this workshop, the various editions are interchangeable.] |
| Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Menzell (eds) | <i>The Norbert Elias Reader: A Biographical Selection</i> (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). |
| Stephen Menzell and Johan Goudsblom (eds) | <i>Elias, Norbert, On Civilization, Power and Knowledge</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) |
| Robert van Krieken | <i>Norbert Elias</i> (London: Routledge, 1998). |
| Jonathan Fletcher | <i>Violence and Civilisation: an Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias</i> (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997). |
| Goudsblom, Johan | <i>Sociology in the Balance: A Critical Essay</i> (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 Menzell (eds) | <i>Norbert Elias</i> , 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.] |
| Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley (eds) | <i>The Sociology of Norbert Elias</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) |
| Richard Kilminster | <i>Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology</i> (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007) |

Richard Kilminster *The Sociological Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1998)

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.

- Stephen Menell *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998), chapter 10.
- Stefan Breuer 'The denouements of civilization: Elias and modernity.' *International Social Science Journal* 128 (1991), pp.401–16.
- Derek Layder 'Social Reality as Figuration: a critique of Elias's conception of sociological analysis', *Sociology* 20 (1986).
- Zygmunt Bauman 'The Phenomenon of Norbert Elias', *Sociology* 13 (1979), pp. 117–25
- Artur Bogner 'The structure of social processes: a commentary on the sociology of Norbert Elias.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 20 (1986), pp. 387–411.
- Eric Dunning "In Defence of Developmental Sociology." *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 4 (1977), pp. 327–49.
- Dunning, Eric and Stephen Menell "“Figurational Sociology”: Some Critical Comments on Zygmunt Bauman's “The Phenomenon of Norbert Elias”", *Sociology* 13 (1979), pp. 497–501 (reprinted in Dunning and Menell (eds), *Norbert Elias*, vol. 1, pp. 233–55.
- Stephen Quilley and Steven Loyal 'Eliasian Theory as a “Central Theory” for the Human Sciences', *Current Sociology*, 53: 5 (2005), pp. 809–30.
- Johan Goudsblom *Sociology in the Balance* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1977)
- Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Menell 'Civilising Processes – Myth or Reality?: Review article on Hans-Peter Duerr, *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß*', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39: 4 (1997), pp. 729–33.

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)
- Eric Dunning and Chris Rojek (eds) *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process: Critique and Counter-Critique* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992)
- Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (2nd edn, with a new afterword, London: Routledge, 2005 [1st edn, Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1979]). [Note: The afterword brings the story up-to-date, through the abandonment of amateurism in Rugby Union.]
- Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy, and John Williams *The Roots of Football Hooliganism: An Historical and Sociological Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988)
- Eric Dunning, Patrick Murphy, Ivan Waddington and Antonios E, Astrinakis (eds) *Fighting Fans: Football Hooliganism as a World Phenomenon* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2002)
- Olle Edström, *A Different Story: Aesthetics and the History of Western Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008).
- David Garland *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)
- Johan Goudsblom *Fire and Civilization* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 19992)
- Bram Kempers *Painting, Power and Patronage* (London: Allen Lane, 1992)
- Helmut Kuzmics and Roland Axtmann *Authority, State and National Character: The Civilising Process in Austria and England, 1700–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)
- Dominic Malcolm and Ivan Waddington (eds) *Matters of Sport: Essays in Honour of Eric Dunning* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- Joseph Maguire *Global Sport: Identities, Societies, Civilizations* (Cambridge : Polity Press, 1999)
- Joseph Maguire *Power and Global Sport: Zones of Prestige, Emulation and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2005)

- Stephen Mennell *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996 [orig. 1985])
- Stephen Mennell *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007)
- John Pratt *Punishment and Civilization: Penal Tolerance and Intolerance in Modern Society* (London: Sage, 2002)
- Chris Rojek *Capitalism and Leisure Theory* (London: Tavistock, 1985)
- Abram de Swaan *In Care of the State* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988)
- Pieter Spierenburg *The Spectacle of Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
- Cas Wouters *Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West, 1890–2000* (London: Sage, 2004)
- Cas Wouters *Informalization: Manners and Emotions since 1890* (London: Sage, 2007)
- Ivan Waddington *Sport, Health and Drugs: A Critical Sociological Perspective* (London: Spon, 2000)