

Laudatio Helmut Kuzmics

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Delivered at the opening of the conference on 'Habitus, War and Civilisation', held in honour of Professor Helmut Kuzmics on his retirement from the Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz, 25–27 April 2013

It is astonishing that we are gathered here today to honour Helmut Kuzmics upon his retirement. With his Franz Liszt hairdo, Helmut has always appeared ageless.

I have only recently become aware that, like me, Helmut was originally an economics graduate. I've often wondered whether a training in economics is helpful in learning to think processually. Whether that is true or not, Helmut, like me, found his way into the intellectual orbit of Norbert Elias and 'process-sociology'. The title of his first sole-authored book, his *Habilitationsschrift – Der Preis der Zivilisation* – sounds almost as if could have been written by an economist. Well, in fact, it was, later – the economist Jeffrey Sachs recently published a book with the same title, but in English: *The Price of Civilization* (2011). But that is a very different book: rather than plagiarising Helmut, Sachs took his title from Oliver Wendell Holmes's remark that 'Taxes are the price we pay for civilization'.

Der Preis der Zivilisation, in contrast, owes more to the spirit of Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* – or *Civilisation and its Discontents* as it is known in English. It takes its departure from all the discussions of the 1960s–80s (indeed continuing to this day) about the 'social costs of growth' or the 'crisis of modernity'. Central to the discussion, of course, is Elias's theory of civilising processes. If any further refutation were needed of the naïve misunderstanding that Elias is advancing a Victorian theory of 'progress', Helmut provided it in this book. Not that that would actually prevent misunderstanding – wilful misunderstandings of Elias seem to spring up like Hydra's heads. Nevertheless, Helmut shows clearly the balanced view that Elias takes – the two sides of the coin of civilisation, its costs as well as its benefits. Along the way, there are valuable discussions of any number of other sociologists and social thinkers: Erich Fromm's idea of the 'marketing orientated' personality, David Riesman's similar idea of the 'other-directed man', Herbert Marcuse,

Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, Richard Sennett. Helmut's comparison of Elias and Erving Goffman is especially of continuing relevance. My guess is that most American sociologists would still regard Goffman as a more important sociologist than Elias. And, in a recent conversation involving me and Cas Wouters, Helmut helped me to see precisely why this is so. American sociology is still predominantly symbolic interactionist (when it isn't closet Parsonian), essentially micro-sociology with no place in it for a conception of a relatively stable habitus, formed – and gradually changing – in human groups from generation to generation. That ahistorical, hodiecentric, micro-sociological current has made it difficult – at least until very recently – for all but a tiny handful of American sociologists to grasp what Elias is on about.

Along with Hermann's Korte's *Über Norbert Elias* and my own book *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image*, Helmut's *Habilitationsschrift* was one of the first published studies of Elias's thought. All three appeared in the last couple of years of Elias's life. Reading between the lines, Helmut seems to have had the good sense not to draw Elias's attention to what he was up to, thus avoiding the great man's severe disapproval to which I was subjected.

I knew of Helmut's book before I met him in person. He wrote to me in 1989 and asked whether he could come to spend a sabbatical year with me in Exeter. I wrote back that Exeter had little to offer him, and that in any case I was about to clear off to Australia. I encouraged him to go instead to Cambridge, where he spent a year as the guest of Tony Giddens. I am relieved to say that he seemed to survive the experience intellectually unscathed. Helmut and I finally met face to face at a conference in the Appalachians in 1992, since when we have been in more or less constant touch and have I think become close friends.

One thing that soon became apparent to me was that Helmut was distinctly better-read in literature than I was myself. I don't mean in German literature – that goes without saying – but in English literature. Eventually, with Gerald Mozetic, Helmut would write a whole book on *Literatur als Soziologie*, but he had been using literature as sociology long before. In this too, he was drawing inspiration from Elias. As he remarked,

Avoiding the technical and formalised 'new-speak' of sociology, which

exhausts one through the creation of ‘variables’, Elias’s empirical work contains numerous literary examples that produce a vivid impression, seldom reached by most sociological studies. (Salumets, ed., p. 116)

Other notable sociologists, including Lewis Coser and Wolf Lepenies, have discussed how literature can be used in sociology, but I think it is Helmut Kuzmics who has reached the nub of the problem. As the passage I have just quoted implies, he rejects the scientific mainstream view that seeks only numbers, variables and supposedly general laws – but he also rejects the philosophoidal, hermeneutic, social constructionists who at their most extreme see not only literature as no more than a text to be studied but also social science as a mere text in just the same way. Like Elias, Helmut is a realist, and he wants to use literature in a realist fashion, to yield evidence of what the society in which it originated was really like. Yet he acknowledges the problems associated with that. He quotes Peter Laslett, who, in the face of the interpretation of literary texts notably by Ariès in his studies of the family and dying in past centuries pleaded for a return to the hard demographic data that had yielded such convincing (and often counter-intuitive) results for Laslett himself. But, Helmut pointed out, even Laslett left one escape route for the justification of literary evidence: the application of the sociology of knowledge to the social context, the complex communicative processes through which literature is produced. That Laslett allowed this escape route is not so surprising as it at first appears, because Laslett had been a student of Karl Mannheim’s in London. On reflection, I think that many of us who have attempted to make sociological use of literary sources have more or less unconsciously used Laslett’s sociology of knowledge escape route. But it has been Helmut who worked out the theoretical justification in precise detail.

And not just the theoretical justification: also the empirical demonstration of its application, especially in his work on ‘national character’.

‘National character’ is a concept that needs to be handled carefully. I recall that at the conference in Amsterdam last year one of the local sociologists almost had apoplexy when I used the term ‘national character’ rather than ‘habitus’. Of course, whether one speaks of ‘national character’ or ‘national habitus’, one has to tread carefully in view of past horrors of racism and so on. But it is stupid to run away from the topic entirely for that reason. Two quotations to make the point:

1 In a remark that I am fond of quoting, Kluckhohn and Murray (1948: 35) wrote that:

Every person is in certain respects

- (a) like all other people
- (b) like some other people
- (c) like no other person

The study of group habitus is concerned with the middle level of those three. It deals with those things that people learn from each other within groups – groups of any size from families to nations – which become very deeply habituated and which mark out some difference from other groups, trivial or not, in behaviour and feeling.

2 And, as for the national plane of group habitus, Elias put it with his usual subtlety when he wrote:

[E]very country has its specific traits ... because the histories, and above all the basic features of the social development of nations, are to a certain degree different. These differences are precipitated in the language and modes of thought of nations. They manifest themselves in the way in which people are attuned to one another in social intercourse, and in how they react to personal or impersonal events. In every country the forms of perception and behaviour, in their full breadth and depth, have a pronounced national tinge. Often one only becomes aware of this in one's dealings with foreigners. In interactions with one's compatriots, individual differences usually impinge so strongly on consciousness that the common national coloration, what distinguishes them from individuals of other nations, is often overlooked. First of all, one often expects that people everywhere will react to the same situations in the same way as people of one's own nation. When one finds oneself in a situation in which one is compelled to observe that members of different nations often react in a quite different way to what one is accustomed to at home, one mentally attributes this to their 'national character'. As such, it often remains inexplicable. One simply accepts it. (*Essays II*, pp. 230–1)

Helmut Kuzmics's major development of this insight, marked by extensive use of literary evidence, is in the book he wrote with Roland Axtmann, *Authority, State and National Character* – which, unfortunately, seems to be the only one of Helmut's books to have been translated into English. This study of state formation and habitus formation in two fallen empires is fascinating, especially for Anglophone readers, who have been exposed to endless studies of German habitus – including Elias's *Studien über die Deutschen*, which is mainly about north German, especially Prussian, attitudes – but on the whole are relatively unfamiliar with the internal history of the Habsburg Empire.

Kuzmics and Axtmann inevitably start from the national stereotypes that have established themselves: the English 'gentleman's code', with its great control over aggressive impulses, 'but also over all emotions that might be regarded as importuning or molesting others' (p. 14) – in short, the famous stiff upper lip – and a rather slight 'formality–informality span'. The equivalent Austrian stereotype was less familiar to me; it was marked by:

greater disparity between affects that are given free rein in private, or towards subordinates, and the formal comportment that is required towards superiors in 'official' situations. Austrian submissive friendliness and *Gemütlichkeit* ... were cultivated especially in domestic settings ... in which the feudal-caste, patrimonial lifestyle yields slowly to that of the bureaucrat. (p. 14)

I just hope that Helmut's long benevolence towards me is not a mere manifestation of 'submissive friendliness'.

As I myself found in the course of my studies of English and French attitudes to food, and of American habitus, one can slave away sceptically for years in the libraries and archives and eventually discover that the initial stereotypes were alarmingly near the truth. But it is the tracing and explanation of their track of development that is important. Kuzmics and Axtmann pithily describe the Austrian course of development as being 'from manorial absolutism through to confessional absolutism in the context of the Counter-Reformation to reform absolutism'. That sounds pretty much like the recent history of Ireland! But, more seriously, it is in

tracing the tracks of state-formation processes, power struggles and the moulding of habitus in the two countries that Kuzmics and Axtmann make impressive use of such diverse authors as Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, C. S. Forrester, Anthony Trollope, and Franz Grillparzer, Robert Musil, Johann Nestroy, and Joseph Roth.

The snag is that *Authority, State and National Character* covers only the two centuries from 1700 to 1900. Much as we may wish to reject ‘hodiecentric’ or ‘presentist’ sociology, the question of more recent changes in national habitus is intriguing. A clue came in a lecture that Helmut gave a few years ago at University College Dublin. Quite casually, he referred to ‘the collapse of British national character’ – with no further discussion, because he rightly assumed that the matter was beyond dispute. And so, I think, it is.

Back in 1959 and 1961, Norbert Elias gave two lectures in Germany on what he then called ‘British public opinion’. The description he gave of the habits and habitus of the British sounded very much the same as they did at the point in 1900 when Kuzmics and Axtmann laid down their fountain pens. More important, Elias’s picture of Britain around 1960 rang true to me, as I remember Britain from my teenage years. But, to use the familiar quotation from L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there’ – the Britain described has gone with the wind. So, a few years ago, Helmut and I planned to write a joint article exploring how and why that happened. My suggested working title was ‘Americans with an inferiority complex: the collapse of British national character’ – though Helmut thought that was a bit too incendiary. The essay hasn’t been written so far, but perhaps, when Helmut has retired and when I have finished editing the *Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, we shall still get round to it.

Underlying all of Helmut’s work is what has come to be known as ‘the sociology of emotions’, and that is the most distinctive contribution which in recent years Helmut has brought to the central subject of this conference: the sociology of war. Because it will be much discussed during the conference, I will not say much about this, the most recent phase of his work, except to say that bringing to bear the sociology of emotions on military history is highly original. Helmut, with Sabine Haring, has edited a book specifically exploring that: *Das Geschicht des Krieges: Militär aus emotionssoziologischer Sicht*. There’s a little bit of cheek in that title, which echoes Sir John Keegan’s famous book *The Face of Battle*. Perhaps

we can also detect a residue of old-fashioned patriotism in Helmut's concern with the emotional as well as logistic and bureaucratic reasons why the Austrian army lost so many battles, notably Königgrätz, which proved to be such a catastrophe for Austria in long-term perspective.

Helmut has been a wonderfully generous colleague to me, and to dozens of other scholars in the human sciences across Europe. One short section of my book *The American Civilizing Process* I owe utterly and completely to Helmut. It deals with the absence of an American 'aristocracy of office' – no *Amtscharisma* and no dynasties of officials. It's obvious once one has seen it, but Helmut, who has written about 'bureaucratisation as an Austrian civilising process' saw it more easily than I did.

When I first visited Graz in 1996 to give a lecture here, I was immensely impressed by the nameplate on Helmut's door. It read, if I remember it exactly,

Tit. Aus. Prof. Dr Hab. Mag. Helmut Kuzmics

Helmut explained that the only bit that mattered was 'Tit.', for 'Titular', which meant that the university didn't actually pay him anything extra in respect of all those other titles. I am glad that the university subsequently made an honest man of him by making him a real Professor, and seating him in the chair from which we are now celebrating his retirement.

In conclusion, let me just say that in my opinion Helmut Kuzmics has one of the most penetrating sociological minds in Europe today. I wish my good friend long life, health and happiness – and lots of writing – in his retirement.