

Remarks on the Completion of the of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias

Stephen Mennell, General Editor

Thank you, Vice-Chancellor.

One of the many things of which the University of Leicester can be proud is that in 1954, just before the then University College received its royal charter, it appointed a rather obscure German refugee to his first permanent university post, at the extraordinarily advanced age of 57. He had published very little, apart from one great book that scarcely anyone had read, so it must have taken some courage for Ilya Neustadt and his colleagues to make this appointment. And yet today Norbert Elias is widely recognised as one of the greatest sociologists of the past century. It is true that Steven Pinker has described him as ‘the most important thinker you have never heard of’¹ – a remark that I found rather dispiriting, after doing my best over several decades to help make people hear about him – but that is changing even in the USA. The riches to be found in the 18 volumes of the Collected Works should help to consolidate his reputation even further.

Among the older generation of sociologists present today, there is a great affection for and gratitude to this university. Several of those involved in the Collected Works were students here in Leicester. I myself never was, though I seem to have had a tenuous but continuous connection ever since, as a sixth-former, I put Leicester about third in my university application form. I was offered a place here, but ended up at Cambridge, where I was taught sociology by two spin-outs from the Leicester Department, Earl Hopper – whom I am delighted to see here today – and John Goldthorpe. Later, though, I came to know the Leicester department more directly, and spent happy hours drinking beer and talking sociology with Eric Dunning, and occasionally joining Norbert Elias in what he called ‘peripatetic sociology’.

Elias’s ideas have not on the whole had the immediate emotional appeal that for

¹ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 59.

example those of Foucault or Bourdieu have had, especially in British sociology where the ‘critique’ of the existing social order on the one hand and policy relevance on the other have always been central. Elias insists that his sociology *is* relevant to understanding how human society works and how it can be made to work better – but only after we make a long and careful *detour via detachment*.

Perhaps because of this ‘cool’ and relatively detached quality in Elias’s writings, I have often had the feeling that many British (and Irish) sociologists have thought it slightly mad of us to spend a decade of our lives editing Elias’s work at the rate of about one volume every six months. That feeling has been enhanced by the voice of Elias himself whispering in my ear, ‘Stephen, my dear, you should be writing your own books’. But when we embarked on this enterprise, only two of Elias’s books were still in print in Britain, and a group of us thought that we could undertake no more important a task than to ensure that Elias’s intellectual legacy endured.

At this point I want to express my gratitude to many of the people who have carried this enterprise forward. This part of what I have to say may sound a bit like a speech at the Oscars, but I promise not to burst into tears.

First, I must thank Joop Goudsblom and Hermann Korte, my fellow members of the Board of the Norbert Elias Foundation, not only for the Foundation’s financial support for this enterprise, but also for having inveigled Barbara and me into it in the first place. They knew, of course, that Barbara and I had founded UCD Press back in 1995, and that I was then chairman of its Editorial Committee and Barbara its Executive Editor. Given my obvious conflict of interest, they negotiated the contract with Barbara and with UCD’s Vice-President for Research at the time. The main point of this story, however, is that it is hard to imagine how the project could have been completed so briskly were it not for the happy chance of a husband-and-wife team involved with both the publishing house and the Foundation. Barbara’s role has been extraordinary: she has done the final copy-editing on all volumes (quite rightly not trusting me to get everything right), seen them through the press, and indexed all the volumes, mostly jointly with me but in a couple of cases on her own. She was also the principal architect of the consolidated index in volume 18, which will prove to be an essential navigational aid through Elias’s writings.

Next, I want to thank the members of the Editorial Advisory Committee: Joop Goudblom, Eric Dunning, Johan Heilbron, Robert van Krieken, and especially its chairman, Richard Kilminster. Richard has been a constant source of advice, and his name appears as an editor on the title pages of no fewer than seven of the volumes. Richard and I are particularly proud of the three volumes of Elias's essays that we jointly edited. It is not just that many of the essays had appeared in quite obscure places and were difficult to obtain, but that bringing them all together revealed a corpus of writing that is of the greatest importance. The essays on the sociology of knowledge and the sciences in volume 14 are in themselves of a significance that no professional social scientist should overlook, while the range of topics covered in volumes 15 and 16 is quite breathtaking.

Others who acted as editors of one or more of the volumes are: Eric Baker, Artur Bogner, Eric Dunning, Joop Goudblom, Edmund Jephcott, Marc Joly, Robert van Krieken, Katie Liston, Steve Loyal, Steve Quilley, Alan and Brigitte Scott, and Cas Wouters,

I am sorry that Edmund Jephcott cannot be with us today. Edmund not only translated most of Elias's books back in the 1970s and 1980s, but agreed to translate all the rest of Elias's writings in German that had not previously been published in English. As you will see from the sheet we have included in the conference pack, the Collected Works include quite a large proportion of works that have not previously been published in English, including one book – *Humana Conditio*, in which Elias says important things about world politics and international relations – and about a third of the essays.

Next, let me thank Sir Keith Thomas, who has saved me as General Editor from quite a number of editorial and historical gaffes. I knew that Keith was an enthusiast, albeit not an uncritical one, for Elias's work. I asked him whether he would agree to be 'Patron' of the Collected Works. He asked me what being a 'Patron' of a series of books involved, and we agreed that we had no idea. Then Keith said, 'Well, I could read the proofs for you'. And that he has done. I think I am a pretty good proof-reader, but Keith leaves me standing – Peter Burke says that Keith can spot a misprint at a hundred paces. We are honoured to have Keith with us today.

Finally, another behind-the-scenes helper has been Ruth Weibel, of the Stichting's literary agents, Liepman AG, in Zürich, who is also here with us today. Ruth has guided us

through the complexities of international copyright law and publishers' contracts.

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About 25 years ago, I remember Jeff Alexander remarking to me how intellectually rewarding it was 'to come to terms with a great mind'. He was right – we have found this whole project intellectually rewarding, But Jeff was thinking of Talcott Parsons, I was thinking of Norbert Elias. I had in fact studied with Parsons, briefly, in the 1960s. I had come to terms with his ideas, and although I liked the man, I found myself wholly unconvinced by his theoretical apparatus. When in the early 1970s I quite accidentally encountered Elias's *Was ist Sociologie?*, and then Elias himself,² I found Elias to be a vastly more impressive intellect than the then far more famous Parsons. Only much later did I come to appreciate the deeper roots of the difference between them: Parsons stood avowedly in the Kantian tradition,³ while Elias's career was one long crusade against Kantian apriorism, against any form of transcendentalism, and ultimately against the whole discipline of philosophy. Elias was nothing if not brave! – philosophy is still a very prestigious and powerful discipline, to which most sociological theorists still kowtow. Instead, Elias was developing a 'post-philosophical sociology', as Richard Kilminster has termed it.⁴

But the immediate cause of my own Damascene conversion was chapter 3 of *What is Sociology?*, the 'game models',⁵ where Elias – in what he modestly calls merely a 'didactic aid' – ties it all together at once: power relationships and interdependence, unintended consequences, long-term social processes, individual and society, macro/micro connections, problems of concept formation, the formation of we-images, the genesis of habitus and social ideologies, and even the limitations of conventional survey research. This chapter ought to be on every social scientist's reading list, but it isn't. Indeed, just how its profundity can be overlooked was shown by the *New Statesman's* reviewer back in 1978: he said it was another example of the tired old analogy of social interaction as a game.

² Stephen Mennell, 'Elias and the Counter-ego', *History of the Human Sciences*, 19: 2 (2006), pp. 73–91.

³ Talcott Parsons, 'On building social system theory', *Daedalus* 99: 4 (1970), pp. 826–81.

⁴ Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-philosophical Sociology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

⁵ Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 5]), pp. 66–98.

When looking through the then-unpublished typescripts concerning the naval profession, René Moelker unearthed a revealing little handwritten note by Elias to himself. It read: ‘Das Eliassche Method: “Makrostrukturen durch die Untersuchung von Mikrostrukturen sichtbar zu machen”’ – ‘By investigating microstructures, to make macrostructures visible’. This is one clue not only to Elias’s great range, but also to his extraordinary powers of synthesis – of joining things up, seeing connections between aspects of human life normally seen as unrelated. And he always does that in a way that is simultaneously theoretical *and* empirical.

In *Quest for Excitement*, he alludes to the Greek myth of Hercules fighting the giant Antaeus.⁶ Every time Hercules knocks him to the ground, the giant springs back up with renewed vigour. Finally, Hercules realises that what he must do is to hold the giant clear of the ground, and Antaeus’ strength ebbs away. Theories that are too far up in the air lose their strength too. Elias, in other words, does not seek to provide a filing cabinet of static concepts, but always keeps his feet on the ground. He saw his task as:

constructing a central theory of sociology that would be close to empirical facts and thus testable and correctable, the task of laying the foundation of a theoretical structure on which later generations could build, and then either reject, correct or develop further – I pursued this task more and more consciously through all the many special tasks that came to meet me on my winding path.⁷

These volumes provide not just an inspiration but also a large toolkit for what is now a well-established research tradition and an extensive international network of ‘figurational’ or ‘process’ sociologists. And not just sociologists. Elias’s work is now attracting attention from a whole range of disciplines: history, psychology, psychotherapy, International Relations and criminology among them (and even philosophers sometimes!). We hope that in making available Elias’s entire *oeuvre*, we

⁶ Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 7]), p. 77.

⁷ Norbert Elias, *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013 [Collected Works, vol. 17]), pp. 50–1.

shall prevent it falling victim to what – to borrow the title of a forthcoming book edited by Alex Law – we may call ‘sociological amnesia’.

Please now go out and – even if you can’t afford to buy all these volumes for yourself – make sure that your university’s library buys them!

Finally, let me end by expressing our best wishes to the Leicester Department of Sociology as it goes forward with renewed strength. And, not least, let us thank its three new Professors – Jason Hughes, John Goodwin and Henrietta O’Connor – and their colleagues for organising this conference.