

## *Goudsblom behind the one-way mirror*

**Stephen Mennell**

Joop and Maria Goudsblom have a fondness for lamps of spare and modernistic design which throw a restrained and indirect light on their surroundings. In one of his less well-known essays, Joop – in his usual highly detached way – indirectly illuminates the obstacles which have barred the way to the reception of his own work outside his native land. The essay is about Dutch sociology in the 1950s, and tucked away in a book about anti-Americanism.<sup>1</sup> During that decade when, to an extent that now seems inconceivable, international sociology was dominated by the orthodoxy of Talcott Parsons's synchronic functionalism, sociologists in the Netherlands – unlike their mostly monoglot British and American counterparts – were able to read and appreciate the best writing in English, French and German as well as Dutch. They selected, rejected and innovated, but then wrote about their insights *in Dutch*. That guaranteed that they would not be read by any significant number of their English, French or German-speaking colleagues. Goudsblom brilliantly compares this to the view from behind the one-way mirror once commonly found in the small-group laboratories of social psychologists: the observers can see everyone out there beyond the glass, but cannot be seen themselves. This is the plight not just of Dutch sociologists at the time when Goudsblom himself was a student and junior lecturer but, to a certain extent, of Dutch academic life in general down to the present when he stands on the brink of retirement. And it helps explain the curious disjuncture and asynchronism which seems to have prevented a proper reception beyond the Netherlands of the works of one of the best sociological minds in Europe.

The problem has nothing to do with writing in English. Goudsblom has always published in English as well as Dutch. He writes a spare and elegant English – like his lamps, again – vastly better than all but a small minority of anglophone sociologists. I always momentarily forget that Viottastraat 13 is a Dutch-speaking household, because it instantly switches into perfect English as I come in through the front door. No, the problem is an

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Goudsblom, 'Dutch Sociology in the 1950s: A View from Behind the One-Way Mirror', in Rob Kroes and Maarten van Rossum, eds, *Anti-Americanism in Europe*. Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1986, pp. 112–20.

intellectual, not a linguistic one. The English-speaking academic world seems to have difficulty in understanding where (besides a low-lying country bordering the North Sea) Goudsblom comes from. Goudsblom has shared that problem with – and no doubt in part inherited it from – Norbert Elias. He also seems to have inherited Elias's bad luck with English-language publishing.

Goudsblom's first book in English, *Dutch Society* in 1967,<sup>2</sup> should have been the least vulnerable to these problems. By December 1968 it was into its third printing. At the time, students of sociology in British and American universities were often given a quick exposure to Dutch social structure, usually in courses on 'social stratification', because of interest in *verzuiling* ('a sort of peaceful Northern Ireland', as Colin Crouch was laconically to describe it in the light of later events). Goudsblom gave what to my knowledge is still the clearest brief account in English of that process and its origins. If the book did not stay much longer in print, it is probably because Dutch society itself underwent such rapid and radical changes from about that time. Not only was there *ontzuiling*, but the relatively rigid and formalised patterns of behaviour described by Goudsblom were undermined by pervasive informalising processes. (Elias was to arrive on the Amsterdam scene in the midst of the 'student revolution', and from his early seminars as well as under Goudsblom's influence, Cas Wouters, Christien Brinkgreve, Paul Kapteyn and others were to begin acclaimed research on informalisation.)

Problems of timing also beset *Nihilism and Culture*. The English translation of Goudsblom's doctoral thesis of 1960 was published by Blackwell only twenty years later.<sup>3</sup> Among the reasons why it made little impression in the English-speaking academic world are, I believe, that: on the one hand it made detailed reference to such figures of the 1950s as Talcott Parsons and A.L. Kroeber who were no longer much read or regarded; on the other hand, it also drew greatly on the work of Norbert Elias, who in 1980 was still almost unknown to English-speaking sociologists (just the first volume of *The Civilising Process* having been published in 1978); and its use of Nietzsche antedated the sudden and unforeseeable resurgence of interest in that philosopher which swept the anglophone academic world perhaps 8–10 years afterwards.

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<sup>2</sup> Johan Goudsblom, *Dutch Society*. New York, Random House, 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Johan Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980.

But undoubtedly the greatest tragedy in the reception of Goudsblom's work in English was that *Sociology in the Balance* made little impact.<sup>4</sup> When I first met Joop and Maria, at Norbert Elias's house in Leicester at New Year 1975, Joop was in the throes of translating *Balans van de sociologie* into English, and Norbert had flagged up that I might offer to look over the draft. This was the beginning of a long collaboration. Joop (in whom Norbert placed far greater trust in these matters than he did in me – with good reason) helped me later that year to put the translation of Norbert's *What is Sociology?* into acceptable order, and in return I offered what one of my then colleagues at the Council of Europe called 'churchillisation' of Joop's work. I suppose I have churchillised most of what Joop has written in English since then. Not that it is ever an arduous task: it usually means changing a few perfect tenses into simple past, and straightening out the odd preposition here and there.

When the draft of *Sociology in the Balance* arrived on my desk, I knew I was looking at a masterly work. I had just published my first book, a textbook of sociological theory<sup>5</sup> which was well received, used widely in theory courses (not just in Britain), stayed in print for twenty years, and made me a modest amount of money. I knew instantly that it was pedestrian in comparison with *Sociology in the Balance*. The Dutch version of the latter, I knew, had made a considerable splash, and been seen as a continuation of Goudsblom's critique of conventional American-style functionalism-cum-empiricism (begun earlier with his sharp criticism of Van Doorn and Lammers's textbook). It had confirmed his reputation as perhaps the most trenchant sociological thinker in the Netherlands. Yet, when it was published in 1977, *Sociology in the Balance* sold few copies and soon remaindered. It attracted some favourable reviews, including one from Anthony Giddens, but at least one reviewer sounded outraged that someone with an unfamiliar name (and, no doubt, from an unfamiliar country) should dare to challenge the sociological mainstream so fearlessly.

What conceivable advantages could my book have over Goudsblom's impressive work? None, except that I knew then (I doubt whether I still do) how to write for the average English-language university student and teacher of sociology. *Sociology in the Balance* was dogged by troubles. Blackwells were going through a bad patch at the time, printed it not

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<sup>4</sup> Johan Goudsblom, *Sociology in the Balance: A Critical Essay*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Mennell, *Sociological Theory: Uses and Unities*. London, Nelson, 1974; rev. ed. 1980.

very attractively on cheap paper, and completely botched the printing of the cover, which was supposed to show children bouncing each other around on one of those huge rubber inflatables, as an analogy for social interdependencies in human figurations. Although I was vastly less familiar with Elias's ideas than I became later, I instantly saw that the book was – as it remains – the major methodological statement of the figurational or process-sociological perspective, and a critique from that point of view of the entire corpus of modern sociology. In my opinion, it still stands comparison with C. Wright Mills's classic *The Sociological Imagination*<sup>6</sup> and is vastly superior to its near-contemporary, Alvin Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* which had caused such *éclat*.<sup>7</sup> Goudsblom's critique of 'attempts at system-building in sociology' (chapter 3) is as pertinent to the aspirations of Giddens or even Habermas today as it was then to Talcott Parsons, and his discussions of 'problems of scope' and 'problems of relevance' (chapters 4 and 5) are as inspiring and apposite now as ever. So why did the book fail in English? In part, I think, because Goudsblom was so little known outside the Netherlands. Such a provocative book could only be accepted from someone with an already large reputation, and its often acerbic criticisms of the intellectual failings of the established academic community could not be taken from an outsider like Goudsblom. But the decisive reason, I believe, was that a book written from an Eliasian standpoint – however originally and creatively the author had developed that standpoint – simply could not be understood at a time when scarcely any anglophone sociologists had even heard of Elias. *Sociology in the Balance* found its way into print a year before *What is Sociology?* and the first volume of *The Civilising Process*, five years before the second volume, six years before *The Court Society* and so on. It was also published two years before Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard's *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players*,<sup>8</sup> which was the first major book by British sociologists written explicitly under the influence of Elias's sociology. In short, however timely had been *Balans van de sociologie*, *Sociology in the Balance* was a book years ahead of its time. Sadly, however, it could not be simply republished unchanged today because, although the essentials of the critique would need little modification when redirected at the writings of sociologists over the last two decades, the targets of the critique in the old text would now seem dated.

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<sup>6</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. London, Heinemann, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football*. Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1979.

Despite his now much wider international reputation, Goudsblom's bad luck in publishing in English has continued. With one of his later books, I was myself directly associated. In Exeter sometime in the late 1980s, I had introduced Joop Goudsblom to Eric Jones, the Australian-based economic historian – more exactly, a self-proclaimed 'environmental historian' – whose work he already admired. That led in turn to my arranging for Goudsblom to be appointed Visiting Professor of Sociology at the University of Exeter in Michaelmas Term 1988, coinciding with one of Eric's frequent visits there. Together the three of us ran a seminar on very long-term development, and we then assembled our papers into the jointly-authored book *Human History and Social Processes*.<sup>9</sup> The title was perhaps unhelpfully vague. The book was published by University of Exeter Press at the very end of 1989, less than two months before I left Exeter to take up a chair – partly at Eric's instigation – in Australia. Since my wife Barbara had been the publisher at University of Exeter Press, the book was in effect 'orphaned'. There was an interregnum following her departure, and very little effort was made to sell the book. Only on my return to Europe in mid-1993 did we decide that the little waif deserved better. We were invited by M.E. Sharpe, New York, to produce a new edition – my own contributions in particular are substantially new, and Goudsblom's and Jones's chapters have been thoroughly revised – which was finally published in 1996 under the altogether more grandiose title of *The Course of Human History*.<sup>10</sup> It is too soon to say whether this little book will finally exorcise the Goudsblom curse.

That leaves one major work, *Fire and Civilisation*.<sup>11</sup> Again, Joop Goudsblom has been disappointed in the reception of this book. Yet in many respects it has been a great success – more widely read and noticed than any of his previous books. It was little reviewed by *sociology* journals, but that was more a reflection on sociology than on the book. This time, Goudsblom was in effect the victim of the intellectual Taylorism that he had denounced in *Sociology in the Balance*; it would seem that many sociologists cannot recognise

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<sup>9</sup> Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones and Stephen Mennell, *Human History and Social Processes*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones and Stephen Mennell, *The Course of Human History: Economic Growth, Social Process, and Civilisation*. Armonk, N.Y., M.E. Sharpe, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilisation*. London and New York, Allen Lane, 1992.

sociological reasoning when they encounter it in a book that is learned, interdisciplinary, and of such wide scope as this. They tend to prefer hodiecentric treatments of limited problems of the here and now. Moreover, *Fire and Civilisation* is written in that now extremely sparse style that Goudsblom himself has recognised as akin to ‘minimalist art’. Many sociologists are gullible enough only to be impressed by writing marked by impenetrable gobbledegook, one of the signs of prestige in our most uncourtly society. On a different level, the fact that the book was published by the Penguin group proved in the end to be a mistake. For an ordinary academic publisher, the sales of *Fire and Civilisation* would have been highly satisfying. But for a trade publisher like Penguin, they seemed disappointing. The result was that, by 1996, Penguin remaindered the book. That happened to be just the moment when the book had achieved a cult following, as witnessed by a vigorous discussion of it on a major listserv on the Internet. And that is a good note on which to end a rather depressing catalogue of disasters, for it is testimony to the fact that – in spite of everything – Goudsblom’s international reputation is at last substantial as well as controversial.

Joop Goudsblom’s long-term reputation will rest not just on his own publications but also on his outstanding role in building up, since the end of the 1960s, one of the most distinctive, distinguished, and productive research schools of sociology in Europe. I myself am honoured to be counted – since Joop became my own *doctorvaater* in 1985 – as a member of the Amsterdam School of sociologists. The extraordinary diversity of the topics on which he has promoted doctoral theses needs no elaboration: for his monument, look about you at the list of contributors to this volume. The publication of notable books and essays in English by Goudsblom’s colleagues and former students – quite a flood of them in recent years – means that the Amsterdam School as a whole is less internationally invisible than it once was. And that brings me to a little-known characteristic of the one-way mirror. The observers behind the glass are invisible as long as they sit in the subdued light of their reading lamps. But if they turn on enough lights, the glass becomes only opaque: the observers can be observed, not perfectly perhaps, but distinctly all the same.