

HUMAN FIGURATIONS

ESSAYS FOR
AUFSÄTZE FÜR
NORBERT ELIAS



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AMSTERDAMS SOCIOLOGISCH TIJDSCHRIFT

"Individual" action and its "social" consequences in the work of Norbert Elias

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Ask any present-day student of sociology which name he associates with the idea of unintended or unanticipated consequences of action, and he will almost invariably say Robert Merton. The answer is perfectly reasonable. For although, as Merton demonstrated in an early article (1), the notion has a long ancestry in the writings of many earlier sociologists and philosophers (for example in Hegel's discussion of *die List der Vernunft*), it has been popularised largely through Merton's own work. It can be seen as the connecting thread which runs through his influential writings on science, bureaucracy, *anomie*, reference groups and functionalism (2).

Yet, justifiably esteemed as Merton's work is, it is a pity that the idea of unanticipated consequences is quite so closely associated with his name. For Norbert Elias from his earliest publications displays a clearer recognition of the significance of unforeseen consequences of action, and they are central to his vision both of sociology as a discipline and of the sociologist's vocation.

Merton's most extended and explicit discussion of unanticipated consequences (3) has - perhaps unanticipatedly - led to too narrow an interpretation of their place within sociological theory. (Indeed his essay is grouped with others under the heading "Studies in Social and Cultural Structure" rather than that of "Theoretical Sociology.") Starting from W.I. Thomas's dictum that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," Merton proceeds to focus merely on an oddity, the "self-fulfilling prophecy," with passing mention of the converse "self-contradicting" or "suicidal prophecy." (4) The self-fulfilling prophecy occurs where people's actions are based on a false perception or "definition" of a social situation, but have consequences which subsequently make that definition accurate - as for example in a panic run on a bank. Such situations are fascinating, but fundamentally a trivial diversion, because they are only a rather unusual and special case of something far more common and of far greater theoretical significance.

Much more clearly than Merton, Norbert Elias recognises that men's knowledge of the social structures or (a less static

term) figurations in which they are caught up is virtually always imperfect, incomplete and inaccurate. The strategies of action which they base on this inadequate knowledge therefore more often than not have consequences which they do not foresee. So unanticipated consequences are not a curious footnote to sociology, but nearly universal in social life. For Merton, the self-fulfilling prophecy is like a boomerang: the consequences of men's actions rebound upon their initiators. For Elias, the analogy is much less exotic and much more commonplace: like the effect of a stone dropped into a pool, the consequences of men's actions ripple outwards through society until they are lost from sight. Their effects are felt, not at random but according to the structure of the figuration in which they are enmeshed, by people who may well be quite unknown to each other and unaware of their mutual interdependence.

"Unintentional human interdependencies", writes Elias, "lie at the root of every intentional interaction." (5) As people have come to occupy more and more differentiated and specialised social positions, they have spun ever more complicated webs of interdependence, in which first hundreds, then thousands and finally millions have been caught up; the resulting figurations are neither planned nor within the control of any individual or group of individuals. Elias has repeatedly sought to demonstrate why it is that human figurations, though produced simply by the interweaving of innumerable separate people, are nevertheless generally experienced by those who constitute them as something opaque, impersonal and constraining. This, of course, is the frequently misconceived issue of "the Individual and Society" with which Durkheim, Weber and many other sociologists have struggled. It has been argued that sociologists fall into two camps - those who consider that sociological theory must begin by studying the "Individual" and his actions as they then affect "Society," and those who want to begin from social structure to understand how it affects individuals. Elias cuts across all this. He argues that it is as much a nonsense to try to understand the "Individual" in isolation from figurations in which he is entangled as it is to try to study "Society" as something separate from the people who comprise it. The repercussions of a person's actions for those with whom he is interdependent can only be understood by tracing them through the structure and dynamics of the encompassing figuration. But equally, why people act as they do can only be understood in relation to the figuration.

"The way in which individual members of a group experience whatever affects their senses, the meaning which it has for them, depends on the standard forms of dealing with and of thinking and speaking about these phenomena gradually evolved in society." (6)

Individual thought and action can therefore only be fully understood in social developmental context. And the figuratio-

nal process can so compel the actions of the many separate people who comprise it that they fall into a developmental pattern, unplanned and uncontrolled but - if sufficient intellectual detachment is possible - discernible. Elias speaks of these patterns as "compelling trends" (*Zwangsläufigkeiten*) (7).

All this was set out quite clearly by Elias as early as 1939, in *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. He begins by studying the development of more and more stylised codes of individual behaviour, the elaborate rules of etiquette originating among the nobles of the late Middle Ages and culminating in the highly defined and refined rituals of seventeenth and eighteenth century Versailles. Why did elite groups impose these severe restrictions on their own behaviour, and why did wider strata later come to adopt these elite codes? Elias shows that this "civilising process" is intimately bound up with the process of state-formation. The transformation of medieval warrior-knights into a courtly nobility ran in parallel with the gradual establishment of state monopolies of fiscal and military power. Changes in social figuration - in social relations between people - were accompanied by changes in behaviour, and in peoples's beliefs, attitudes and emotional structure, altogether forming an unplanned but structured developmental process.

"out of the interweaving of innumerable individual interests and intentions - be they compatible, or opposed and inimical - something eventually emerges which, as it turns out, has neither been planned nor intended by any single individual. And yet it has been brought about by the intentions and actions of many individuals. And this is actually the whole secret of social interweaving - of its compellingness, its regularity, its structure, its processual nature, and its development." (8)

In short, "in the development of human societies, yesterday's unintended social consequences are today's unintended social conditions of 'intentional human actions'." (9)

Elias's fullest and most "abstract" attempt to explain the nature of the interweaving process appears in *Was ist Soziologie?* which, though published only in 1970, is largely derived from a manuscript on "*Die Gesellschaft der Individuen*" written many years earlier. Particularly persuasive as a didactic device are his "Game Models." (10) He uses the models as greatly simplified analogies to real social processes, but because real games are themselves social processes, the analogy is a good deal less dangerous than the physical and biological analogies so frequently encountered in sociology. Games are trials of strength or skill played out according to rules. Not all social relationships, of course, are rule-governed, as Elias makes clear in a prefatory "Primal Contest," representing the ruthless and rule-less interdependence of two warring tribes (or perhaps, implicitly, of "established" groups and "outsiders") (11). The first game models involve only two players, and

resemble real games like chess; as more players are introduced, team games like football, about which Elias has written elsewhere (12) are called to mind; but the last group of game models are too complex for real games and are plainly based on Elias's studies of state-formation processes.

Imagine a game played by two people, one of whom is a much stronger player than the other. The stronger player has a great deal of control over the weaker, and can actually force him to make certain moves. Yet, at the same time, the weaker player has some degree of control over the stronger, to the extent that in planning his own moves the stronger player has at least to take the weaker's into account. Both players must have *some* strength or there would be no game. Nevertheless, because one player's strength or skill so considerably exceeds the other's, he can to a large extent control *the course of the game itself*, not only winning, but virtually dictating how he will win and how long it will take.

However, even when only two players are involved, a rather different situation emerges if, for whatever reason, their strengths in the game gradually become more equal. Two things diminish: the stronger player's ability to use his own moves to force the weaker to make particular moves, and his ability to determine the course of the game. The weaker player's chances of control over the stronger increase correspondingly. But, as the disparity between the players' strengths is reduced, the course of the game increasingly passes beyond the control of either. As Elias explains:

"Both players will have correspondingly less ability to control the figuration of the game, for it will become less dependent on each player's private plans and intentions for the game. But conversely, each player's general strategy in the game and his every move will be increasingly dependent on the changing figuration of the game process. The character of the game will change, gradually ceasing to be the accomplishment of an individual plan and becoming a social process. In other words, there will emerge from the interweaving of moves made by two people a game process *which neither of the two people has planned* (13).

Predicting the state of even a two-person game like chess, say twelve moves ahead, is extremely difficult. There are numerous possible outcomes with differing degrees of likelihood. What is more, the probabilities change with each successive move. That is not to say that the development and figuration of past games cannot be studied, analysed and explained.

The introduction of increasing numbers of players into the game models makes possible infinitely more complicated figurations. Elias first postulates a contest in which a very strong player simultaneously plays separate games against a number of less skilled opponents. The weaker players do not co-operate with each other. The stronger player's advantage in each sepa-

rate game is very great, but his superiority might be undermined as the number of separate games increases; there is a limit to the number of separate relationships which can effectively be carried on at the same time by one person.

The next possibility is that the weaker players form a coalition against the stronger. The balance of power is then much more indeterminate. If the coalition is unified and harmonious, its members' degree of control over their opponent's moves may be enhanced. If it is beset by inner tensions and disagreements, however, that is likely to reduce the advantages of the coalition and might conceivably put the opponent at a greater advantage than he was in prior to the coalition.

More interesting still, though, are games in which two groups of roughly equal strength play against each other. With many players, there is a flurry of move and countermove. Neither side can quite determine either the other side's tactics or the course of the game. The moves of one player can be understood neither alone nor solely in relation to those of fellow team members, but only with respect to the whole game. Episodes acquire a certain fleeting structure of their own and - as one can actually see in most sports - a distinct vocabulary comes to be used to describe these patterns and phases in the game.

In the third group of game models, the number of players is larger still, and it is difficult to think of counterparts among real-life sports; we are now concerned with rather elaborate social processes. It becomes more and more difficult for any single player to put together a mental picture of the state and process of the game in which he is involved. That is very confusing, for every player needs such a picture in order to anticipate what will happen next and plan his next move accordingly. If the web of interdependencies becomes too far-flung and ravelled, the individual can no longer make sense of the game nor formulate his strategy.

"If the number of interdependent players grows, the figuration, development and direction of the game will become more and more opaque to the individual player. However strong he may be, he will become less and less able to control them. Therefore, from the point of view of the individual player, an intertwining network of more players functions increasingly as though it had a life of its own." (14)

Like those in previous models, this is no more than a game played by many individuals. The difference is that, as the number of players grows and the chains of interdependence lengthen, the individual becomes gradually more *conscious* of the figuration's opacity and of his inability to understand and control it.

If players can no longer map out what is happening overall and plan their moves accordingly, the game is likely to become dis-

organised, and pressure builds up for the players to reorganise themselves. They may segment into several small independent groups. Or the large group may remain interdependent, but assume a more elaborate figuration with two or more tiers. In a multi-tier game, not all the players any longer play directly with each other. Opposing sides still play against each other and test their relative strengths. But the moves are made by specialised functionaries on an upper tier - leaders, delegates, representatives, negotiators, committees, elites, governments. Yet these are not independent of lower-level players, and they are in fact involved in subsidiary game contests with the lower tiers.

When there is a comparatively small circle of upper-tier players, and they are very much stronger than the lower-tiers, the game is an oligarchic one. Each player on the upper level is once more able to picture the figuration of players and the development of the game, and to plan a coherent strategy through it for himself. As Elias remarks, the Duc de St. Simon believed he knew exactly the mechanisms of courtly society at Versailles. Yet though the figurational process may appear relatively transparent, it is in fact much more complex than anything observed in the earlier models; it is far more difficult for one player to steer the game in the direction he desires. For several different balances of power have to be taken into account: between the top-tier players; between top-tier players and lower-tier players; between lower-tier groupings.

If power differentials between upper and lower tiers diminish, the balances of power and the course of the game become even more indeterminate, fluid and beyond the control of any single individual or group. This, of course, had happened over the last two centuries as first bourgeoisie and then workers have come to occupy more and more strategic positions in the webs of interdependence within modern societies. In an oligarchic game, lower level players may seem to be entirely controlled by the upper tier. But as the ties of interdependence between the tiers increase, the opposite may seem closer to the truth. The upper-tier players become, more overtly, spokesmen for the lower groups. For each spokesman, his strategy with respect to the lower tier groups becomes as important as strategy towards others on the upper tier. The course of the game becomes still less susceptible to control and direction from any quarter, and more than ever people find themselves subjected to "compelling social forces." This is reflected, though not very lucidly, in people's consciousness, in the way they think about themselves and "society."

"Instead of players believing that the game takes its shape from the individual moves of individual people, there is a slowly growing tendency for impersonal concepts to be developed. ... These impersonal concepts take into account the relative autonomy of the

game process from the intentions of individual players ... Metaphors are used which oscillate constantly between the idea that the course of the game can be reduced to the actions of individual players and the other idea that it is of a suprapersonal nature."
(15)

It is first difficult and even repugnant, argues Elias, for people to come to terms with the idea that the society of which they themselves are part largely follows a "blind" course, relatively autonomous of the objectives of its members. Similar obstacles to understanding that *natural* phenomena were blind, purposeless sequences of events impeded the rise of the natural sciences. The obstacles to social science are all the greater. The opacity of social networks to those caught up in them is characteristic of all stages of social development, "but only in a particular phase of this development could people become aware of this opacity and also, therefore, of uncertainty about themselves as a society." (16) Sociology had its beginnings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when increasing specialisation, growing differentiation and lengthening chains of interdependence were making social processes still more opaque, and transforming society with a rapidity which made it imperative to try to understand them.

The foundations of sociology were laid by Adam Smith, Comte, Marx and other great writers, in the reappraisal of whose work Elias has repeatedly found inspiration. In seeking to understand the social transformation they witnessed, they asked questions about the long-term development of societies which are still in need of more adequate answers.

"How is it to be explained that a development of societies went on in this case for centuries, through all the fissions and fusions, all the disintegration and integration spurts, in the direction towards the formation of larger and more closely knit societies? How can one account for the fact that, over the centuries, this change had a specific direction although it was unplanned? For who was there to plan it, and to execute such a plan?" (17)

Post-war sociology has largely ignored this problem. Its ideal of "good theory" has been timeless, law-like generalisations, employing a mode of abstraction modelled on that of classical physics. Change has usually been perceived as an unstructured, accidental flow of events, as mere "history." And, as Elias points out, if events are seen as congeries, as possessing no structure, it is not possible to explain them or to formulate testable theories about them. In contrast, in Elias's writings,

"Terms such as 'growth' or 'development' refer to a specific way in which events are connected with each other. It is a type of connectedness different from that with which classical physics was concerned. Every datum forming part of such an order presupposes an antecedent datum as its necessary (though not necessarily its sufficient) condition and may in turn become a necessary (though

not necessarily a sufficient) condition for a further stage within that process of growth or development. I use as conceptual badges for this type of order terms such as 'sequential order' or 'serial order'." (18)

"Good theory," for Elias, is five dimensional, seeking to trace and explain the development of figurations in space, time, and experience. Sociologists' more usual pursuit of timeless, law-like generalisations is reflected in their methods of research - in their neglect of documents and other historical evidence, and in their use of the questionnaire. Perhaps the questionnaire, that Pavlovian reflex of social research, which treats the respondent as an isolated "individual," best symbolises the static and atomistic assumptions implicit in much contemporary sociology. The problem of opacity in social figurations is such that, even if questionnaires yielded full evidence of every individual's perceptions of the figuration into which he is interwoven, that evidence would not necessarily, or even usually, add up to produce an adequate understanding of the structure and dynamics of the figuration. If the sociologist is to unravel social processes, he must be able to spot the consequences of people's interweaving actions which they did not perceive, and this involves finding the factual links missing from participants' pictures of their social figurations.

Underlying all Elias's writings, even those apparently least concerned with mundane practical problems, is a moral commitment to the calling of sociology and a belief that to understand the compelling nature of blind social processes is to increase the *chances* of controlling them. Elias describes sociologists as "destroyers of myths." (19) By factual observation they endeavour to replace myths, religious and metaphysical speculations, and all unproven images of social processes with theories - testable and correctable by factual observation. This task will never be finally accomplished. For one thing, scientific theories are always being turned into belief systems and used in ways for which they were not intended. Sociology in particular has from its origins been inextricably entangled with the development of the major modern social ideologies.

"One result of the awakening consciousness of the relative opacity of social processes and the inadequacy of explanations solely in terms of individual people has been an effort to examine social processes using an approach analogous to that of the older sciences. ... Another result has been that people tend to orientate themselves to relatively opaque social situations with the aid of relatively impersonal but emotionally charged social belief systems and ideals. These are all the more satisfying because they usually promise immediate relief for all social ills and sufferings, or even a complete cure in the near future. ... The development of human society still remains opaque and is still beyond our powers of control. Sooner or later we shall consciously have to decide which of the two types of orientation, the scienti-

fic type or that based on social beliefs, is the more likely to succeed in elucidating it and making it more susceptible to control."(20)

"*Savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir.*" Of course, to help people to foresee the hitherto unforeseen consequences of their actions precipitates no automatic amelioration of the problems of social life. Examples abound of people unwilling to change a pattern of behaviour merely because its factual origins and consequences are revealed to them. Indeed, even where the consequences of a pattern of behaviour are perfectly evident and generally deplored, even where the means of avoiding them are obvious, there will not necessarily be any change in the behaviour. George Orwell once pointed out that although everyone knew that deaths and injuries resulted on a large scale from the use of motor-cars, they did not really care, for the very low speed limits necessary to avoid the evil would be considered quite unacceptable (21). Nevertheless, it is a tenet of Elias's work, which few sociologists would dispute, that sociological research can only improve the human lot by clearing through some of the fog which obscures our understanding of social forces.

The "Individual" and "Society," the nature of sociological explanation, the relationship between history and sociology, and between sociological knowledge and its applicability to social life - these are a few of the central issues of theoretical sociology on which Norbert Elias has written with a clarity and authority rivalled by few other contemporary sociologists. One cannot help speculating how different might be the state of *sociology* today if his writings had been accorded the attention they deserve, and if indeed they had been published when they were first written. That question, however, pales into insignificance compared with another. How different might be the state of *society* at large if the nature of the problems with which Elias deals - the sources of opacity in the processes of human interweaving and the compelling figurational trends which make people act as they do - were widely understood, grasped, and resolved?

NOTES

1. R.K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review*, 1 (6) 1936, pp. 894-904.
2. R.K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, enlarged edition, Free Press, New York, 1968.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 475-490.
4. Although it seems to me that what Thomas actually said is quite valid, as I have argued elsewhere (see "Ethnomethodology and the new *Methodenstreit*," *Acta Sociologica*, 18 (4) 1975, pp. 287-302), his dictum has been misappropriated by sociologists of the phenomenological persuasion who

seem to believe that if men define situations as real, they are real. Merton's too intimate linking of unanticipated consequences to the self-fulfilling prophecy may, no doubt unintentionally, have helped to hallow this misinterpretation.

5. Norbert Elias, *Was ist Soziologie?*, Juventa Verlag, München, 1970, p.99.

6. Norbert Elias, "Problems of Involvement and Detachment," *British Journal of Sociology*, 7 (3) 1956, pp. 226-252.

7. This does not imply that Elias adopts any kind of behaviouristic determinism, with which he has sometimes been charged by proponents of "voluntarism." Elias's views are in fact quite compatible with the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, which is a keystone of the various interactionist schools of thought in sociology. Even Talcott Parsons, when first propounding his "voluntaristic theory of action" in *The Structure of Social Action* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1937), recognised that physical and social "conditions" placed limits on possible or likely courses of action. The timeless, "analytic" nature of Parsons's approach, however, prevented him from consistently seeing the necessity of investigating empirically how narrow or wide these constraints may be in particular historical and social circumstances.

8. Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Francke, Bern and München, 1969, vol. II, p. 221.

9. J. Goudsblom, *Sociology in the Balance*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1977, p. 149.

10. *Was ist Soziologie?*, op. cit., chapter III.

11. N. Elias and J.L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*, Frank Cass, London, 1965.

12. N. Elias and E. Dunning, "Dynamics of Sport Groups with Special Reference to Football," *British Journal of Sociology*, 17 (4) 1966. pp. 388-401.

13. *Was ist Soziologie?*, op. cit., p. 85.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

17. Norbert Elias, "Processes of State-Formation and Nation-Building," *Transactions of the Seventh World Congress of Sociology*, Varna, 1970. Vol. III, p. 278.

18. Norbert Elias, "Theory of Science and History of Science," *Economy and Society*, 1 (2) 1972, p. 121. In order once again to rebut the charge of determinism, Elias continues, "the problem of prediction from a given stage of such a developmental order for a future which has not yet occurred ... has to be clearly distinguished from the problem of discovery and explanation of the nexus of a sequential order which has already occurred." See also *Was ist Soziologie?*, op. cit., chapter VI.

19. *Was ist Soziologie?*, op. cit., chapter II.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

21. *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, Vol. 4, pp. 274-275.