

Johan Goudsblom, 11 October 1932–17 March 2020



Joop Goudsblom's contribution to the wider recognition of the value and significance of the work of Norbert Elias was unparalleled. But as we grieve his death, it is more important to record that Joop himself had one of the world's most penetrating sociological minds, and that he was a warm and greatly valued friend and mentor to very many of us.

Joop was born in Bergen in North Holland, an only child. His father was a schoolteacher; his mother died while Joop was a university student. He lived through the wartime occupation of the Netherlands, including the 'hunger winter' of 1944–5, which he remembered vividly. Decades later, in the kitchen at J. J. Viottastraat 13, when I was fuming at the American invasion of Iraq, proclaiming that 'People don't like their countries being invaded', Joop commented drily, 'Well, I've lived through two invasions of the Netherlands; it is true that we didn't like being invaded by the Germans, but we were quite pleased to see the Canadians.'

In school, Joop learned Latin, Greek, English, German and French – one wonders

how time was found for the rest of the curriculum – and won a national prize for an essay on ‘Youth friendship crosses borders’, a prize that took him on a visit to post-war Britain (where he saw mountains for the first time). He also spent a year at Wesleyan University, Connecticut. His command of English was remarkable even by Dutch standards. In later years, he occasionally corrected the English of native speakers. (I can testify to that: I once muddled the words ‘testament’ and ‘testimony’.)

In 1951, after the year in America, he went to the University of Amsterdam to read social psychology and, apart from short periods as visiting professor elsewhere, he was to remain there for the rest of his life. In his student days, Joop was one of the editors of and a regular author for the locally famous student weekly *Propria Cures*; among his fellow editors who became long-term friends were the writer Renate Rubinstein and Aad Nuis, who was later the Dutch Minister of State for Culture. And in the university Joop also met Maria Oestreicher, who as a child had survived deportation from Amsterdam to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. They were married in November 1958, and were as close a couple as can be imagined. After her death in 2009, Joop referred to Maria’s ‘omni-absence’. Joop and Maria came as a couple to academic conferences, and hospitably welcomed countless guests to their home, which some of us facetiously used to refer to as the Hotel Viottastraat (or even just as ‘headquarters’). In consequence, many of us felt we knew Maria just as well as we knew Joop. Their two children, Clara and Frank, were born in 1964 and 1967.

Early in Joop’s time as a student in Amsterdam came another important encounter. He heard his professor, A. N. J. den Hollander, refer to a book by one Norbert Elias: *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. Then he found a reference to the same book by the greatly admired writer Menno ter Braak (who had reviewed it when it was first published in 1939, but who had committed suicide when the Germans invaded the Netherlands). Joop found a copy of the first edition in the university library, and it made a profound and lasting impression on him. Later, he used to say that he had read the book at least a dozen times, and he had found new insights every time. Joop finally met Elias in person at the 1956 ISA World Congress of Sociology in Amsterdam, and they maintained close contact from then onwards.

Joop’s doctorate, supervised by Professor A. N. J. den Hollander, was published in 1960 under the title *Nihilisme en Cultuur*. It was a study of the problem of nihilism – a state of mind in which nothing appears to have value or meaning – in Western culture. Nietzsche is a central figure, and the influence of Elias is already evident, but so is that of Talcott Parsons, the then-dominant sociological theorist whose influence would later vanish from Joop’s work. The English translation, *Nihilism and Culture*, did not appear until 1980, but the first

book that Joop wrote in English had already been published in 1967. That was *Dutch Society*, a comprehensive survey of the distinctive social features and national habitus of the Netherlands. Here Elias is directly mentioned only once, but the developmental perspective is plain and the book is still well worth reading precisely for its insights into Dutch social development, including the famous *verzuiling* or pillarisation that has now largely disappeared. If the book made less impact than it deserved, it was because at that very moment Dutch society, which had seemed rather stolid and conservative, suddenly underwent startlingly rapid change. This was the period of the Vietnam War, student unrest across the world, and in Amsterdam the celebrated ‘white bicycles’.

In 1968, Joop was appointed a very young *hoogleraar* (full Professor), and the following year, on his advice, his friend and colleague the historian Maarten Brands invited Elias to Amsterdam as Visiting Professor. This was only the second time that Elias had been invited to a visiting appointment on the European mainland. The distinction of being the first belonged to the University of Münster, to which he was invited by Professor Dieter Claessens and where Hermann Korte was appointed Elias’s graduate *Assistent* – the beginning of a lifelong friendship with Elias and eventually also with Joop Goudsblom. But back to Amsterdam in its white bicycle phase: there are tales of Elias sitting cross-legged in a student-organised seminar on ‘Revolution: personal and political’. Joop himself, like Elias, navigated the tricky currents of student discontent more successfully than some of his colleagues. Elias became a frequent visitor to Amsterdam and eventually, in 1977, took up permanent residence in the apartment above the Goudsbloms’ house (although from 1978 to 1984 he was also a Fellow-in-Residence for much of the year at the Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung in Bielefeld).

During the late 1960s and 1970s, there began to form around Joop a formidable research group, which came to be known as ‘the Amsterdam school’ before the slightly misleading label of ‘figurational sociology’ caught on. Over the years, Joop supervised an astonishing number of doctorates, on an equally astonishing range of topics (from nuclear war to food history, for example). They all, however, bore the hallmarks of the figurational or Eliasian perspective: simultaneously macro- and micro-, psychogenetic and sociogenetic, with historical depth as well as contemporary reference. All this was controversial: Joop had to do (intellectual) battle with more conventional Dutch sociologists – at first structural-functionalists and Marxists, and later the advocates of phenomenology, rational choice, quantitative and other sociological perspectives. The most comprehensive exposition of his vision of the discipline of sociology came in *Balans van de sociologie* (1973, English

translation *Sociology in the Balance*, 1977). Although many of the sociologists referred to may now seem a long time back, this book is still an inspiring read not just for figurational sociologists but for *all* sociologists. Regrettably, it did not have as great an impact in the Anglophone world as it did in Dutch. It was not helped by Blackwells' botching the printing of the cover, which was supposed to show children on a bouncy castle as an analogy to the way people's actions bounce into each other in society. But I think there were two more significant reasons. First, although this book is not an exposition of Elias, the fact that at the time Elias was still very little known in the English-speaking world meant that readers were perplexed, asking themselves 'where is the author coming from?' Secondly, Joop always wrote a spare and elegant English. His was a 'minimalist art', and many sociologists – 'theorists' especially – see no value in ideas that are clearly expressed rather than dressed up in obscurantism and neologisms.

In 1977, with Hermann Korte and Peter Gleichmann, Joop edited a Festschrift to mark Norbert Elias's eightieth birthday, *Human Figurations*, which was presented to Elias at what in retrospect was a relatively small international gathering in Aachen. Elias's *magnum opus* still had not appeared in English translation. When the two volumes were published, in 1978 and 1982, Elias's reputation in Germany and the Netherlands began to jump the language barrier and a steady stream of books and essays began to appear in various languages. Joop was active in all this. With Korte and Gleichmann again, he edited two volumes in German of essays inspired by Elias – the two *Materialienbände* of 1978 and 1984 – as well as compiling one of the volumes of his own essays in Dutch, *De sociologie van Norbert Elias*, 1987; and in the 1990s he and I edited two selections of Elias's work for the British and American markets.

None of this immense activity in promoting the ideas of Elias and 'figurational' or process-sociology ever seemed to diminish Joop's output of books and essays of his own on many topics. His death at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic may serve to remind us for instance of his notable essay on 'Public health and the civilising process' (*Millbank Quarterly*, 1986), which discussed leprosy, bubonic plague, syphilis, cholera and AIDS.

From the early 1980s, however, Joop was working on what became *Fire and Civilization* (1992). It was always a misconception that civilising processes had uniquely taken place in Western Europe – they happen in various forms and scales in all times and places – and this led Joop to the insight that a civilising process had been involved in the first great ecological transition in the course of human development – the mastery of the active use of fire that came millennia before the better-recognised agrarian and industrial

revolutions. Mastery of fire involved the intertwining of biological evolution and social development. Keeping a fire going necessitated social organisation, for gathering fuel, keeping watch, and cooking. *Fire and Civilisation* took the story forward into the agrarian and industrial eras, yet once again Joop was disappointed at the book's patchy reception. Specialists in human evolution seemed not to see the relevance for them of a contribution by a sociologist. And most mainstream sociologists, having executed what Elias called their 'retreat into the present' to arrive at what Joop labelled a 'hodiecentric' sociology, were not greatly interested in the early origins of the human species. They had also become unaccustomed to a sociologist dipping into the literature of disciplines as diverse as ecology, biology, archaeology and anthropology.

The Goudsblom family had always been 'green-minded' or 'ecologically conscious', and in the 1990s and 2000s, Joop's attention was increasingly directed towards understanding the planet's present predicament in the context of *very* long-term social development. He kept up a long correspondence with the world historian William H. McNeill, and with colleagues in Amsterdam he developed a course in 'Big History' inspired by his friend David Christian. One product of these years was the book *Mappae Mundi*, edited and largely written by Joop and the scientist Bert de Vries. It was grandly launched in 2000 in the presence of HM Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Another product, less grand in scope but with an even grander title, was *The Course of Human History* (1996), co-authored with the economic historian Eric Jones and me.

From its foundation in 1983, Joop was a member of the board of the Norbert Elias Foundation, with Hermann Korte and Bram van Stolk. (I joined the board after Bram's death in 1997.) This triumvirate was designated by Elias to manage both his material legacy and his literary affairs after his death in 1990. Apart from organising regular gatherings of interested scholars, the Foundation's major achievements have included the publication of Elias's *Gesammelte Schriften* (1997–2010) and the *Collected Works* (2006–14), in which Joop of course played an active part as editorial adviser.

In 2016, Joop published what should have been the first of two volumes of autobiography, entitled *Geleerd: memoires 1932–1968*, which took his story up to his appointment as *hoogleraar*. Besides his prominence as a sociologist, he had always had something of a literary reputation in the Netherlands – in 1957 he had been a co-founder, and proposed the title, of the Dutch literary magazine *Tirade*, which is published to this day – and the volume was very well received by literary critics who knew little about Joop as a sociologist. Until only a few months before his death he remained intent on writing the

second part, but he hardly committed anything to paper. The first volume ends before most of us knew him. It is tempting for us to ask ‘what would he have written about me?’ But the less egocentric and more interesting question is: what would he have written about us as a ‘figuration’? About the school and paradigm formation around the work of Elias and the development of the ‘figurational perspective’, and his own role in it? It is a real pity that we shall never know.

Upon his retirement in 1997, Joop was presented with a collection of essays, *Alles verandert* [‘Everything changes’], something that in German or English would be called a Festschrift, but in Dutch is called a *Liber amicorum* – a book of friends. That was very appropriate. For so many of us, Joop was a close friend. For me, he was my most important intellectual mentor – I have often said that I learned more from Joop about the Eliasian way of thinking than I did directly from Norbert Elias himself. I find it hard to believe that, after 45 years, I shall no longer be going over to Amsterdam to see him a couple of times every year, and never again welcoming him into our home. Our sympathies go especially to Frank and Clara in the loss of their father. A far wider circle will mourn the loss of a great intellect and wonderful person.

Stephen Mennell