

PARSONS AND ELIAS

Stephen Mennell

University of Exeter, UK

[Published in translation in *Sociologie et société* 21: 1 (1989), pp. 69–86]

Exeter
January 1989

PARSONS AND ELIAS

Norbert Elias has often wondered in later life whether Talcott Parsons could have been one of the American students to whom he taught German in Heidelberg, where they both arrived in 1925. On balance it seems unlikely. To anyone who knew Parsons later, it seems improbable that even as a young man he could make so little impact on Elias's excellent memory that when he rose to eminence an earlier acquaintance could not be recalled. Even so, the possibility of such an encounter is intriguing to someone like myself who studied with the one (albeit briefly) and has been deeply influenced by the other. The two famous sociologists share a common concern with certain key problems, a concern which can be traced back at least to the period when they were both in Heidelberg, but the way they tackled these problems offers marked contrasts. And the course of their careers could scarcely have been more different.

I met Talcott Parsons just before Christmas 1966, when he returned to Harvard after a term abroad. He was at, or perhaps just past, the pinnacle of his prestige and influence: for about two decades, there had been few rivals for his title as the world's most famous sociologist. For nearly forty years, he had taught in one of the world's greatest universities. I met him first socially, at Adams House, where he was a very senior and I a very junior member of the Senior Common Room. I was surprised to find him socially shy and nervous, even gauche, though having myself been equipped as a Cambridge undergraduate with endless small talk and memories of a British university we could share together – and being also *slightly* less overawed by the great man than my American fellow graduate students – I found I could put him at ease, and chatted with him on many occasions. When he resumed teaching, in the Spring semester, we saw the other Parsons: no shyness then, but the intellectual lion behind the lecture desk.

Norbert Elias I met later, back in England, around 1972. By pure chance, I had been asked to help translate his book *Was ist Sociologie?* (1970), and his name had rung only the very most distant of bells; perhaps it had been mentioned once by John Goldthorpe, one of my Cambridge teachers who had previously been a colleague of Elias's at Leicester. Elias proved very different from Parsons: far from shy and nervous, able to make entertaining conversation about everything from pop music to cosmology, a charming companion. What he shared with Parsons, though, was the enormous intellectual confidence in the importance of the problems with which he had long been engaged, and in the rightness of his solutions to them. Yet, already about 75 years old, he had then only just begun to experience the beginnings of recognition, and that at first only in the Netherlands and his native Germany, following the republication in 1969 of his *magnum opus*, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939), later to be familiar to us as *The Civilising Process*. I gradually learnt his history.¹ He had left Heidelberg in 1929 to serve as Karl Mannheim's academic assistant when Mannheim moved to the chair of sociology at Frankfurt. He had just completed his *Habilitationsschrift* – the book we know now as *The Court Society*, eventually published only in 1969 – when Hitler came to power. Elias went into exile, first in Paris, then in England, and completed *The Civilising Process* about the same time as Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action* appeared in 1937. When it was finally published in Basle in 1939, there was not much market for a two-volume work in German, by a Jew, on, of all things, civilisation. It sank almost without trace, as nearly did Elias himself. He held various ill-paid posts on the fringes of British academic life, only finally obtaining a lectureship in a small provincial university – Leicester – in 1954, when he only had eight years to serve until retirement. Talcott Parsons, it is true, had to wait a surprisingly long time before

he received tenure in 1939, but that is nothing compared with Elias's fate. Indeed Parsons died at about the age at which Elias first began to attain wider recognition, and the bulk of Elias's writings have been published in his late 70s, 80s, and into his 90s.

Two paths crossed in Heidelberg, without any collision so far as we know, and then diverged. It is interesting to wonder what Parsons's reaction would have been had he been present when Elias first presented a paper at Marianne Weber's salon. The subject was 'The Sociology of Gothic Architecture', and Elias characteristically – as it was to prove – related differences between French and German cathedrals to differences in French and German society in the Middle Ages. At the time, as we know, Parsons was working on the grander but much more conventional topic of capitalism. Characteristically – as it was also to prove – Parsons approached the subject less through actual empirical evidence than through the question of how certain earlier authors (Marx, Sombart, Weber) had tackled the matter theoretically.

As Parsons himself claimed (1970: 868), and as Guy Rocher has rightly emphasised (1974: 17–19; 124–51), Parsons's essays on a great variety of empirical topics played an important part in the development of his theoretical framework. Yet while that is true, their role seems relatively small when Parsons's corpus of work is compared with Elias's. Most of Elias's writings grapple with detailed empirical evidence, and his theories grew out of constant interplay between empirical investigation and theoretical reflection. That applies both when he is concerned with historical evidence, as in *The Civilising Process*, *The Court Society* and most of his essays on sports (Elias and Dunning, 1986), and when his topic is contemporary, as in *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias and Scotson, 1965) from which developed a general theory of established–outsider relations widely used by Dutch and German sociologists (see Mennell, 1989a: 121–39). Indeed so thoroughly intertwined are theory and evidence in Elias's writings that the first volume of *The Civilising Process*, for example, has sometimes been read as an amusing compendium on manners but of no great general theoretical significance to sociologists. One might say that in Parsons the empirical evidence appears as asides in a predominantly theoretical style of discourse, while in Elias it is the conceptual, theoretical and methodological discussions which often appear as asides. Sometimes Elias seems to have two equally frustrated categories of readers: those who want a good read about manners, courtly life, sports (Elias and Dunning, 1986), attitudes to death (Elias 1985a) or whatever, and are irritated by the self-conscious passages about the sociological enterprise (much as many readers skip Tolstoy's digressions about the forces of history in *War and Peace*); and those who, as proud 'theorists', claim to be unable to make out his overall sociological vision because it is so scattered among his writings on substantive topics. That is, among other things, a sad reflection on the divorce between 'theory' and empirical research which afflicts the sociological profession today.

Points of Departure

The differences in intellectual style between Parsons and Elias date back even before their arrival in Heidelberg, in spite of a quite extraordinary coincidental similarity in their early academic training. Both men as undergraduates first studied both philosophy and biological sciences. At Breslau, Elias completed the pre-clinical phase of medical training while also studying philosophy under the neo-Kantian Richard Höningwald. At Amherst, Parsons followed courses in biology (medicine proper being a postgraduate subject in the USA), and he too read Kant intensively both there and with Jaspers at Heidelberg (Parsons 1970: 826, 876n, 881n). Elias too, during an earlier visit to Heidelberg interpolated in his years as a student at Breslau, had made Jaspers's acquaintance. Both Parsons and Elias frustrated early expectations of their families by choosing not to pursue medical careers, although their training in biological science left recognisable marks on each one's later work in sociology. Both also abandoned philosophy, but in different circumstances which explain a good deal about the later differences in their approaches to sociology.

Although in his early work Parsons did not go out of his way to identify himself explicitly as a philosophic neo-Kantian, the sympathetic references are there to be found. Towards the end of his life, he appears to have become far more conscious of how fundamental a part Kantian assumptions played in his theory of action, both in its origins and in its continuing development (Parsons, 1970, 1978). Bershadsky (1973) argued that Parsons's theoretical strategy was essentially neo-Kantian, seeking to determine the immutable *a priori* categories of thought indispensable to any social scientific knowledge. His concern was not merely to establish a unifying conceptual scheme for social science but *the* unifying scheme. Indeed, in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937: 732 ff.), Parsons compares his social action framework to the space-time categories of physics, which Kant saw as the fundamental, innate and universal, forms of all perception. Münch (1981, 1982) makes a 'larger claim', going beyond these epistemological bases, 'that Parsons's general theory of action and theory of social systems are exactly parallel in structure and method to Kant's critical philosophy' (1981: 713). Münch's interpretation of Parsons is that his solution to the Hobbesian problem of order is neither utilitarian nor normative, but rests essentially on the notion of interpenetration of distinct subsystems of action; and this notion of interpenetration, he contends, 'is a derivative of Kantian transcendental philosophy' (1981: 709).

The term Parsons actually uses to define his epistemological position is *analytical realism* (1937: 728–31). For brevity's sake, let me follow Rocher's (1974: 20–1; cf. Münch, 1981: 727) summary of what this means. Parsons believed that knowledge could only be called scientific to the extent that it had been obtained according to the canons of scientific method. These canons had been worked out rigorously in the course of the last few centuries and, in Parsons's view (in contrast with Elias's), there is only *one* fundamental logic of science, common to the whole range of natural and social sciences. For Parsons, the scientific method was essentially analytic. By that he meant that

it reconstructs reality with the aid of conceptual symbols, and these must not be confused with concrete reality. The conceptual symbols are not perfect reflections of the objective world; they are created by selecting and emphasising certain features of reality, and these serve to structure perception

and knowledge. The mental structure which symbols enable us to construct is never anything more than one particular aspect of the objective reality. So it is not necessary to demand that knowledge embodies a perfect correspondence between the objective reality and conceptual structure. For the latter is a mental construct resulting consciously or unconsciously, from the analytical operation which puts the stress on certain selected elements at the expense of others. (Rocher, 1974: 20)

This may seem an excellent example of the nominalism against which Elias continually protests.² But, again characteristically, Parsons backs away from the full implications of nominalism, arguing that the analytical procedure does not result only in 'useful fictions', as Max Weber considered his ideal types to be, because

if the mental construct is not a perfect reflection of reality, it is more a reconstruction than a distortion of it. It selects aspects of reality in an effective way because there is a continuous interaction between the concept and the reality, so that by successive approximations the mental construct is continually adjusted to reality. ... Because knowledge is analytic, and because the analysis corresponds to certain aspects of objective reality, man can always aspire to knowledge less approximate than he has yet attained. (Rocher, 1974: 20).

That view may appear to have something in common with Norbert Elias's theory of knowledge, as may Parsons's belief that scientific knowledge gives proof of its own validity by 'making possible control, prediction and manipulation' (Rocher, 1974: 20). There are, however, important differences between the two theories of knowledge.

Parsons's impulse was always to look for convergences between great thinkers. It would have been out of character for him to raise radical objections to so prestigious an intellectual figure from the past as Kant and, in any case, he emerged from his early reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with, as we have seen, a clearly positive attitude. In contrast (and equally in line with his temperament) Elias, as early as when he was writing his doctoral thesis under Hönigswald, took issue with the philosophy of Kant, and by extension with the whole central tradition in Western epistemology from Descartes through Kant to Husserl and modern phenomenology. He has grappled with the issue throughout his career, from his 1923 thesis, entitled 'Idea and Individual: A Contribution to the Philosophy of History', up to *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen* (1987a), published on his ninetieth birthday. Elias's objections, which led to quite a struggle with Hönigswald, went to the heart of the Kantian tradition. They concerned Kant's contention that certain categories of thought – Newtonian space, time, causality and some fundamental moral principles – are not derived from experience but are inherent, eternal and universal in the human mind. In his thesis, Elias argued that ideas could not be seen as individual products; intellectual history had to be seen in terms of 'chains of generations', anticipating his later emphasis on the need to think in terms of people in the plural, not 'the Individual' or the 'Ego' in the singular.

Much later, he explained his objections to Kantianism along the following lines. Kant, he argues (basing his judgement on his own early close study of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and also referring to Kant's 1791 essay on 'The Progress of Metaphysics since Leibniz and Wolff' (Elias, 1982: 8)), delved into his own consciousness and there discovered that concepts like substance, space, time and cause could not possibly be based on his experience. Therefore

he concluded that they must come from a frame-of-mind set *a priori* in his own brain. In other words, the form of objects as he perceived them was founded not on the properties of the objects in themselves (the *Ding an sich*), but on the *natural* or *innate* properties of the subject. Having discovered this innate frame-of-mind in himself, Kant very cautiously said that we may conclude that other subjects also have this *a priori* frame-of-mind, *but we can never be certain* of that. Here he was very consistent, because once one has the idea that a frame-of-mind-given-by-nature determines one's thinking, so that one can never be sure that objects really correspond to one's thinking, then one can never be sure of the existence of other subjects either – because other subjects are also then *phenomena* which may possibly be corrupted by the pre-given structure of one's own reason. So Kant was quite aware that his theory of knowledge ultimately had a solipsistic grounding.

Elias uses the term *homo clausus* to describe this Cartesian, Leibnizian, Kantian, phenomenological model of the 'mind' inside its closed container, looking out from inside its box and trying to make sense (as a single isolated mind) of outside appearances. He comments:

Nothing can ever reconcile the polar views and solve the problems arising from the fictitious assumption of an existential gulf between human beings and the world they set out to discover and control – the world of which they themselves form part. This assumption is the stumbling block. Nothing new, no advances in the theory of knowledge and of sciences are possible as long as the assumption of an ontological gulf between 'subject' and 'object', explicitly or not, remains the basis of these theories (1982: 23–4)

Because they bow to philosophical tradition, sociologists too are condemned to endless circular arguments about 'the individual' and 'society'. They develop rival sets of concepts – microsociology and macrosociology, individual-centred and system-centred – which they never succeed in reconciling with each other. And that happens because they reduce what is actually a process to a static polarity of opposites.

Many of these traits, according to Elias, are betrayed in Parsons's work, in spite of his lifelong struggle to overcome precisely these difficulties. Parsons uses the old cliché of the black box ('This process occurs inside that "black box", the personality of the actor'; Parsons, 1966: 20). And the notion of interpenetration, so central to Münch's view of Parsons, in practice is just another manifestation of thinking in terms of static polarities rather than processes:

Parsons adopts the notion already developed by Durkheim that the relation between 'individual' and 'society' is an 'interpenetration' of the individual and the social system. However such an interpenetration is conceived, what else can this metaphor be than that we are concerned with two separate entities which first exist separately and then subsequently 'interpenetrate'? (Elias, 1969b: 229)

There is an obvious escape route from the impasse in which transcendental philosophers have been stuck for centuries.

That way, however, is closed to them. They cannot use it without losing their identity. They are like people enclosed in a room from which they try to escape. They try to unlock the windows, but the windows resist. They climb

up the chimney, but the chimney is blocked. Yet the door is not locked; it is open all the time. If only they knew it, they could easily leave the room. But they cannot open the door, because to do so would disagree with the rules of the game which they as philosophers have set themselves. They cannot open the door, because that would not be philosophical (1982: 15).

So what is this door of the philosophers' self-made prison? The escape from solipsism is to recognise that no person's knowledge has its beginning in him or herself. Each of us, with all our reflections, perceptions, intuitions and experiences, stands on the shoulders of others. In order to understand the pattern of all these intellectual activities and traits as they are today, one has to retrace the long intergenerational process in the course of which they *have become* what they are (1982: 31). Kant, it must be remembered, like everyone else argued with a language he had learned socially. He asked 'where does my concept of "cause" come from?'. He was right that it did not come from his *own* experience: he had not learned it by himself. But he *had* learned it from his teachers. The concept of cause was there in his society. Several generations earlier it had not been. It had gone through a long process of development in society, the intergenerational transmission of symbols slowly adding to the stock of knowledge and of the categories available for use in thinking by people in society.

The crux of *homo clausus*, then, is not just that it is a *single* isolated mind, but that it is also a single isolated *adult* mind. Once that is recognised and abandoned, the central problem of the theory of knowledge is no more problematic than how from birth onwards children learn and use the symbolically transmitted fund of knowledge of all kinds, and themselves *become* adult minds and personalities.

That may not seem anything very different from what Parsons would have said; after all, 'socialisation' is central to his work.³ The crucial difference, however, is that while Parsons thought mainly in terms of lifetime socialisation into a 'culture', a 'culture' about the long-term dynamics of which he had little to say – at least until his late 'evolutionary' work (1964a, 1966, 1971), which has never struck me as being among his best. Elias, in contrast, from the beginning argued the case – unfashionable through most of his lifetime – for such long-term processes of development being central to sociology. That is to take us on to *The Civilising Process*, but before turning to that it is best to say something more about more general questions of theoretical strategy.

Problems of Knowledge and Concept Formation

There is not space to give anything approaching an adequate account of Elias's theory of knowledge and the sciences. That is unfortunate, for in spite of the recent publication of two of his more important essays in *Involvement and Detachment* (1987b), Elias's work in this area is still scattered among numerous publications in both English and German.⁴ But what I have said about Elias's rebellion against philosophy is enough to suggest some of the respects in which he differs from Parsons.⁵ First, unlike Parsons, Elias radically rejects the traditional claims of philosophy to be able to establish the foundations of knowledge for all the various other disciplines; in this, he has something in common with such recent 'anti-foundationalist' philosophers as Rorty (1980). Furthermore, Elias does not accept that there is one single method or logic of science, nor that 'analysis' has the same unique significance throughout all the sciences. In his 1956 essay 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment' (in Elias, 1987b),

Elias put forward a ‘model of models’ in which models of the objects of scientific investigation are ranged along a continuum from the most loosely integrated of congeries to the most highly interconnected and differentiated complex units. There is no sharp dichotomy between the two extremes, and the models appropriate to the various disciplines overlap more than is often recognised. However, says Elias, as one moves along the continuum from one pole to the other, methods of investigation developed at one level lose their usefulness, and become at most auxiliary tools. This is true, for example, of the idea of ‘independent variable’. As one moves away from the congeries pole, it becomes steadily less useful to think of the aggregate unit under investigation as a heap of potentially independent variables, each one of which may be moved separately to observe its effects while everything else remains the same: the ‘experimental method’ of classical physics.

By extension, the general ‘law’ as a model of a scientific theoretical explanation also becomes less and less useful as we move along the continuum of models. That this was not Parsons’s view is demonstrated by Bershadsky (1973). He shows the correspondence between Kant’s categories of understanding and Parsons’s ‘action frame of reference’ involving means, ends, conditions and norms as *a priori* categories of every science. But he goes further in drawing particular attention to Parsons’s fundamental assumption that generalising and causal explanations according to the covering law model are possible only if they are based on the categories of the action frame of reference. Elias disagrees. He points out that one of the tacit assumptions underlying the search for ‘laws’ is that the entities one conceptualises, observes and manipulates are connected in a necessary and unchanging pattern, and do not change their properties irreversibly if they are cut off from their connections with each other. Regularities best suited to expression in the form of an invariant, timeless ‘law’ are those where the relationship between entities is impermanent though it has a permanent pattern: it can start and stop innumerable times without affecting the behaviour of other constituents of any wider nexus. As we move along the continuum further away from congeries, first ‘structure theories’ and then various kinds of ‘process theories’ become more useful than law-like theories. In contrast with ‘structure *and* process’, a favourite phrase of Parsons’s, Elias seeks to investigate the structure *of* processes (see Bogner, 1986).

Even ‘those time-honoured intellectual operations known as induction and deduction’ change their character to some extent as one moves along the continuum of models. Traditionally, in the context of the model associated with classical physics, induction and deduction ‘are closely linked up with intellectual movements up and down between discrete and isolated universals – which may be general concepts, laws, propositions or hypotheses – and an infinite multitude of particular cases which are also conceived as capable of preserving their significant characteristics if they are studied in isolation independently of all other connections’ (1987b). But, nearing the other pole of the model of models, where the composite units under study are much more highly organised, it is more a matter of movements up and down between models of the whole and models of its constituent parts. Elias suggests the terms ‘analysis’ and ‘synopsis’ for the operations in their new guise. Analysis means those steps in research where theoretical attention is focused on the constituent parts, with the larger unit treated more as background. Synopsis means the phases of research where attempts are made to construct a more coherent theoretical representation of the whole, bringing together more or less unconnected theoretical representations of constituent parts. The solution of theoretical problems depends in the long run on co-ordinating and balancing both analysis and synopsis. In the short run, however, synopsis may run ahead of analysis, resulting in rather speculative theories like those of many sociologists in the nineteenth century – the ‘system-builders’ whose models of the history of humanity as a whole outran the acquisition of detailed anthropological

and archaeological knowledge available later. Or analysis may outstrip synopsis, resulting in a plethora of unconnected observational and theoretical fragments, as has been true of much twentieth-century sociology.

That kind of fragmentation is precisely what Parsons hope to cure through the development of his elaborate conceptual frameworks. But it may be questioned whether the task of synopsis can be achieved, or whether it is not merely short-circuited, by so essentially an analytical method. Elias writes:

The example of Parsons's theory suggests ... that theorising in the field of sociology is complicated rather than simplified by a systematic reduction of social processes to social states, and of complex, heterogeneous phenomena to simpler, seemingly homogeneous components. This kind of reduction and abstraction could be justified as a method of theorising only if it led unambiguously to a clearer and deeper understanding by people of themselves as societies and individuals. Instead of this we find that the theories formed by such methods, like the epicycle theory of Ptolemy, require needlessly complicated auxiliary constructions to make them agree with the observable facts. They often appear like dark clouds from which here and there a few rays of light touch the earth. (1969b: 228)

Elias's argument goes further than the commonplace view that in the heyday of Talcott Parsons's static conceptual schemes, sociologists handled 'social change' inadequately.⁶ Inappropriate habits of thought run much deeper, and Elias (1970: 111ff.) argues that new means of speaking and thinking about the kinds of interconnectedness encountered in human society are urgently needed. But tools of thought cannot be changed overnight. Because they are also tools of social communication, they are very durable, and if one seeks to change them all at once, words and ideas swiftly lose their communicability.

Nevertheless, Elias believes that new means of speaking and thinking would actually simplify the work of sociologists:

The complexity of many modern sociological theories is due not to the complexity of the field of investigation which they seek to elucidate, but to the kind of concepts employed. These may be concepts which either have proved their worth in other (usually physical) sciences, or are treated as self-evident in everyday usage, but which are not at all appropriate to the investigation of specifically social functional nexuses. (1970: 111)

At the heart of Elias's critique of sociological categories and conceptualisation is his notion of 'process-reduction',⁷ by which he means the pervasive tendency to reduce processes conceptually to states. It is seen as much in everyday language as in the specialised discourses of the sciences. 'We say, "The wind is blowing", as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow' (1970: 112). This tendency is very widespread in the languages Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) called 'Standard Average European', which most commonly assimilate the experience of change and process through sentences made up of a noun or substantive, apparently referring to a thing at rest, plus a verb to indicate that it then moves or changes. This tendency – also captured in the phrase 'structure *and* process' – was already hardening in antiquity, and was reinforced by Aristotelian

logicians and grammarians. The grammatical pressure makes it difficult to escape this mode of thinking, whether in everyday speech or in the sciences. Whorf argues, however, that there are other, non-European languages which assimilate the experience of process in ways that do not linguistically reduce it to a state.⁸ That does not alter the fact that the languages of modern science are European.

Whatever force process-reduction may derive from grammatical forms, it is also reinforced, according to Elias, by a widespread but largely unacknowledged evaluation in Western culture of that which is eternal and immutable over the changing and changeable. What is changeless is constantly interpreted as what is most real and significant. (When one stops to think about it, that is implied by the very title *The Structure of Social Action*.)

In sociology, the pressure towards process reduction is seen in taken-for-granted conceptual distinctions between the 'actor' and his activity, between structures and processes, between objects and relationships. This is a special handicap when studying figurations of interdependent people. We too often speak and think as if the 'objects' of our thought – including people – were both static and uninvolved in relationships. Concepts of this kind abound in the sociology textbooks: norms, values, roles, social structure, social class. They appear to refer to separate, motionless objects; but on closer scrutiny they actually refer to *people* in the plural, who are now or were in the past constantly in movement and constantly relating to other people. Above all, at the very centre of problems of sociological thinking, the concepts of the 'individual' and of 'society' have this same quality of seeming to refer to static and isolated objects.

Consequently we always feel impelled to make quite senseless conceptual distinctions, like 'the individual *and* society', which makes it seem that 'the individual' and 'society' were two separate things, like tables and chairs or pots and pans. One can find oneself caught up in long discussions of the nature of the relationship between these two apparently separate objects. Yet on another level of awareness one may know perfectly well that societies are composed of individuals, and that individuals can only possess specifically human characteristics such as their abilities to speak, think, and live, in and through their relationships with other people – 'in society'. (1970: 113).

One result of this deeply ingrained but erroneous way of thinking about 'the individual' and 'society' has been to trap sociologists in an endless series of futile arguments about which of the two is the more 'real', and which should come first as point of departure in sociological investigation. Such arguments are circular: they have the same endless possibilities as debating which came first, the chicken or the egg. The misconception – in the most literal sense of that word – is reinforced by the widespread tendency to speak not of people in the plural, but of 'man' (or nowadays, the 'person') and 'the individual' in the singular. Needless to say, 'the individual' is normally thought of as an *adult* person, already fully equipped with the skills necessary to living among his or her fellow humans. It is often asserted that particular 'individuals' are what we can actually *see*, that they are 'real'. 'Society', it is said in contrast, cannot be seen directly; it is not real, but a sort of intellectual construct. The superficial plausibility of this assertion is based on an unconscious overemphasis on the corporeal, material aspect of human beings which, while certainly not irrelevant to sociology as both Elias and Parsons often stress, is by no means what mainly counts in the forms of interconnectedness which sociologists chiefly study. Altogether, the outcome is the 'egocentric' model of society, in which the isolated, static 'me' or 'Ego' stands at the centre of a series of concentric circles,

the first labelled 'my family', with 'my workplace', 'my town', 'my country' in a succession of ever-wider zones beyond (see Elias, 1970: 14). The same model is implied when we refer to the 'individual' and his or her 'environment' and even, very often, in speaking of a 'system' and its 'environment'.

Parsons, in Elias's view, was one of the prime exponents in modern sociology of this egocentric model, which Elias sees as a variant of the *homo clausus* conception. In approaching the problem of 'individual and society', Parsons typically began from the model of interaction between just two people, usually referred to as 'Ego' and 'Alter' (Parsons and Shils, 1951). It is highly significant that in this famous dyadic model, not only 'Ego' but also 'Alter' – the 'other person' – is conceptualised as a single, isolated entity, rather than as a multiplicity of other people, directly or indirectly interdependent with 'Ego' and with each other. Parsons sought to escape from a simple methodological individualism by saying that the 'actor' in his schemata could be either a single person or a collectivity of people – but this bald assertion always struck me as one of the least convincing components of his work. A similar undifferentiated dyadic model *implicitly* underlies most other, more recently fashionable action and interaction theories. Elias, in contrast, makes *interdependence* rather than *interaction* his central notion (sociologists frequently in my experience fail to see the difference, but of course we are all interdependent with far more people than those with whom we interact). The clearest illustration of what this implies for ways of thinking about social processes is his series of 'Game Models' (1970, Chapter 3), models of interweaving processes involving steadily increasing numbers of people linked in interdependence through fluctuating balances of power.

Elias also argues the case for a far more dynamic mode of conceptualisation in sociology. Something, but not much, can be achieved by choosing process-words like *socialisation*, *individualisation*, *civilisation*, *scientification*, or Elias's awful neologism *courtisation*. Such words easily lose their processual character if simply embedded in more general process-reducing modes of thought. The problem of sociological concepts is really much more difficult. In order not to fall into the trap of process-reduction, Elias follows a strategy which has been described as 'concept avoidance' (cf. Blumer, 1930). What this provocative phrase means can best be explained in relation to a nominalist and methodological individualist like Max Weber, who took an exactly contrary view. Weber's opinion was that there was an unbridgeable gulf between the actual social world, elusive and unknowable in its complexity, and the social world as depicted by sociologists. Weber (like Parsons⁹) was, as Goudsblom (1977: 85-6) shows, keenly aware of what A.N. Whitehead (1926: 75ff.) was to call the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; that is, the tendency to assume that every concept which has been abstracted from reality for special purposes of thought corresponds to some actual object existing in reality. Precisely because of this lack of congruency between 'concepts' and 'reality', Weber argued that '*sharp* distinction is often impossible in reality; clear *concepts* are therefore even more necessary' (1922: I, 158). His theoretical models therefore took the form of 'ideal types' that were to be regarded as no more than mental constructs, logically coherent, but 'against the concrete reality of the historical relatively *empty* of content' (1922: I, 4). According to the nominalist view, in other words, social structures must always elude us, and all we can do is build models of actors and their assumptions. Ideal-type conceptualisation, moreover, is peculiarly prone – unlike Weber's substantive historical and comparative work – to process reduction.

What then is the alternative? Elias denies that unless concepts are defined in a highly formalised way for eternity they are 'unscientific' and unusable in sociological research. Anton Blok (1976) draws on the writings of Wittgenstein to support Elias's view. Wittgenstein's

theory of family likeness may help release sociologists from their obsession with formal logic. Wittgenstein demonstrates that it may be impossible to give an adequate definition of a word, even though its meaning is perfectly clear. So it is not a defect if we cannot define a term: 'To think it is would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary' (Wittgenstein, 1958: 27).

Elias's view is not unlike that of Herbert Blumer, who in a well-known paper (1954) argued that concepts were not to be defined as a preliminary to research, but employed as 'sensitising concepts' in guiding investigation. This is particularly relevant to the task – more typical of Elias's work than Blumer's – of handling historical evidence in building process theories of long-term social development.¹⁰

Two Magna Opera

This brings us back finally to the two *magna opera*, Elias's *The Civilising Process* and Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action*. Both books remained essential points of reference for their authors. Parsons used to claim that his later work consisted to a considerable extent of working out ideas implicit in his masterpiece, and the same is certainly true of Elias. The two books could scarcely be more different outwardly, though under the surface they deal with some of the same 'theoretical' issues. Both are, among other things, onslaughts on behaviourism, though Elias broadens his target to include a wider tranche of academic psychology. The anti-behaviourism of *The Structure of Social Action* is too familiar to need elaboration. As for *The Civilising Process*, Elias explains how, reading in the British Museum, he first perceived the significance of the European manners books. What interested him was that academic psychologists of the time (though not the Freudians) thought that by measuring the attitudes and behaviour of present day people, usually by means of questionnaires and attitude scales, they could generalise to mankind in general – past, present and future. Yet in the manners books,

I suddenly found material which demonstrated that other standards of behaviour had been known, and how they had changed. So I began *The Civilising Process*, fully conscious that it would be an argument against the psychological studies of attitudes and behaviour of that time. ... For me it was quite clear that this well-trodden way was no more than an effort to fit humans into the methods of the natural sciences or biology, so that the whole human process of change was pushed aside. That was how it all began. (1984)

But why did Elias see such general theoretical significance in the discussion in the manners books, particularly the earlier ones, of very basic matters, questions of 'outward bodily propriety' which it would later become embarrassing to mention? They tell their readers how to handle food and conduct themselves at table; how, when, and when not to fart, burp or spit; how to blow their noses; how to behave when passing someone in the act of urinating or defecating; how to behave when sharing a bedroom, or indeed a bed, with other people at an inn, and so on. In earlier centuries such matters – discussion of which now causes embarrassment, or at least the humorous sensation of a taboo having been broken – were spoken of openly and frankly, without shame. Then gradually, from the Renaissance, a long-term trend becomes apparent towards greater demands on emotional management and more differentiated codes of behaviour, and thresholds of shame and embarrassment advance.

Elias focused particularly on the most basic, ‘natural’ or ‘animalic’ of human functions – like eating, drinking, defecating, sleeping, blowing the nose – *because these are things that humans cannot biologically avoid doing, no matter what society, culture or age they live in.* Moreover, infants are born in the same emotional condition everywhere, so the *lifetime* point of departure is always the same. Therefore, if change occurs in the way these functions are handled, it can be seen rather clearly. Implicitly Elias was choosing strong ground from which to fight a battle with those who see the relationship between social personality and the broader development of societies as merely random.

Too often the first volume of *The Civilising Process* has been read in isolation from the second. That is made almost inevitable for English-speaking (and French-speaking) readers, because the publishers have marketed the translations as two separate books. But it cannot be too strongly emphasised that they form two halves of a single work. The second volume contains not just a theory of state-formation but a sketch of the structural dynamics of western European society from the decline of Rome to the twentieth century,¹¹ showing why first centrifugal forces and then centripetal, integrating forces were dominant, and how the growth of towns, trade, money and states intertwine processually with the taming of warriors and the civilising process itself, no one of them having causal primacy. It is too complex a work to summarise here, but one central idea, the connection between changing forms of social constraint and changing patterns of personality formation, provokes one last comparison between Elias and Parsons.

Parsons, Elias and Freud

Both Parsons and Elias were deeply influenced by Freud. In Parsons’s case, the influence postdates *The Structure of Social Action*; Parsons used to say that if he were to have re-written that work later, Freud would have been included alongside Durkheim, Weber and Pareto (perhaps instead of Pareto?). In Elias’s case, Freud – especially *Civilisation and its Discontents* – was the single greatest and most obvious influence; although he was well-read in the classics of German sociology, he has said that at the time he wrote the work he was relatively unfamiliar with the great sociologists outside the German tradition. If anything, his use of Freudian vocabulary became rather less prominent in his later work, although the influence remained strong. Interestingly, both Parsons and Elias underwent psychoanalysis themselves in the 1940s.

Neither, however, was an orthodox Freudian (if such a beast is not chimerical). As has often been pointed out – for example by Dennis Wrong in his celebrated essay on ‘The Oversocialised Conception of Man in Modern Sociology’ (1961; cf. Parsons, 1962) – Parsons moved a long way from Freud’s emphasis on the internal conflicts afflicting people in modern society. Like everything else, the personality was rammed into the AGIL schema, that King Charles’s head which so ruined Parsons’s work after the early 1950s. Again for the sake of brevity, let us quote Rocher’s conclusion (echoing that of many other commentators) on this aspect of Parsons’s theorising:

Parsons’s psychological theory seems only faintly Freudian. In Freud’s account instincts, drives and libido play a central part in the personality. The personality is organised around these – it channels, inhibits or suppresses

them, makes use of them or resists them. Freud's originality was to demonstrate the dynamic importance of sexual and erotic instincts, even when they seem to have been suppressed. In contrast, in Parsonian theory, the personality is practically devoid of instincts; they are played down in favour of the internalisation of cultural values and social norms. The id is no longer the bubbling cauldron of energy it is in Freud. Certainly, the notion of need-disposition includes the idea of system requisites as well as that of inclinations and intentions. But Parsons insists that they are learned, not innate, which means they have nothing in common with instincts. To avoid the biological reductionism of instinct theories, Parsons has tended to present a strongly 'sociologised' picture of the personality. (Rocher, 1974: 120–1)

As Rocher points out, in the end Parsons's personality theory has more in common with Mead and symbolic interactionism than with Freud himself, though there is also a resemblance to what Herbert Marcuse (1955) and H.S. Hughes (1975) call the neo-Freudian 'Right' – principally Erich Fromm, Karen Horney and Erik Erikson – who have also shown a strong 'sociologising' tendency. Others have disagreed that this is a fair representation of Parsons's use of Freud. Leon Mayhew (1982: 15) suggests that Parsons 'relied on Freud's sense of the refractory side of human personality, emphasising the difficulty of socialisation', but even he goes on immediately to add that this led Parsons to stress 'the need for all sorts of social supports for developing and sustaining socialised conduct and for coping with the emotional stresses and strains that necessarily agitate even well-socialised adults'. The point is not that Parsons was unaware of 'the refractory side of human personality' when he was writing specifically on personality formation, but that this insight was largely swamped within his wider scheme. Elias accuses Parsons of failing adequately to reconcile his use of psychoanalytic ideas, as in *Family, Socialisation and Interaction Process* (Parsons and Bales, 1956) and especially in *Social Structure and Personality* (Parsons, 1964), with the continuing *homo clausus* basis of the general theory of action:

In Parsons ... the static image of the ego, the individual actor, the adult abstracted from the process of growing up, coexists unmediated with the psychoanalytical ideas he has taken over into his theory – ideas which relate not to the state of adulthood but to the process of becoming adult, to the individual as an open process in indissoluble interdependence with other individuals. (1969b: 250)

Elias himself struggled with the same problems of reconciling Freud with a more sociologically informed insight into personality formation. Elias differs from Parsons particularly in his belief that while human beings lack highly *specific* innate drives or instincts, that paradoxically does not mean that they lack *strong* but innately rather unspecific drives. He uses Freudian vocabulary – ego and super-ego, drives, libido, unconscious, repression and so on – in discussing psychological changes in the course of the civilising process. Yet Elias never accepted Freudian doctrines uncritically. He accused Freud of an ahistoric view of human psychology (1939: II, 285–6). Freud, having observed certain striking characteristics of the personality structure of people in his own time, jumped to the conclusion that these had always existed as parts of an unchanging human nature, true for all time. In particular, he assumed that there had always been the same quite strict division between unconscious and conscious mental functions that he could diagnose in his own contemporaries. On the contrary, Elias contended that this division was one result of the long-term civilising process, but only gradually did 'the wall of forgetfulness separating libidinal drives and "consciousness" or "reflection" ... become

harder and more impenetrable'. Freudians had tended to conceive the most important element in the whole psychological structure as an 'unconscious', an 'id' without a history. They failed to distinguish between the raw material of drives, which perhaps did change little throughout the history of mankind, and the drives as they are channelled through drive-controls which are formed through the person's relations with other people from birth onwards, controls which have become steadily firmer with the changing pattern of social relations in the course of the European civilising process since the Middle Ages. Elias, in other words, denies that except in new-born babies we ever encounter libidinal energies in any human being in a purely raw, pre-social form. They have always already been socially processed, sociogenetically transformed. 'Id' functions can therefore in no way be separated from corresponding ego structures. What determines conduct is none of these alone, but rather the balances and conflicts between people's drives, which are malleable, and the *drive controls* which have already been built in through social experience since birth. What is important is

always *the relationship* between these various sets of psychological functions, partly conflicting and partly cooperating in the way an individual steers himself. It is they, these relationships *within* man between the drives and affects controlled and the built-in controlling agencies, whose structure changes in the course of the civilising process, in accordance with the changing structure of relationships *between* individual human beings, in society at large. (1939: II, 286)

One of the most important changes in the course of the process is, succinctly, that "consciousness" becomes less permeable by drives, and drives become less permeable by "consciousness".

In curious contrast, so far as I can see, Parsons's theory of personality plays no significant part in his late writings on social 'evolution'.

Conclusion

These are only a few of the contrasts that can be drawn between the work of two of the twentieth century's greatest sociologists who began, in Heidelberg and before, from surprisingly similar intellectual backgrounds. Many other comparisons could be drawn; I have, for example said nothing about Parsons's and Elias's respective conceptions of power. Nor, more importantly, have I looked at Parsons's 'evolutionary' writings, which superficially would have been the most obvious point of comparison. The Parsons/Bellah/Eisenstadt seminar at Harvard in 1963 was one of the earliest signs of sociologists' reversal of their 'retreat into the present' (Elias, 1987; cf. Mennell, 1989b), and of the by now very marked return to a concern with the developmental perspectives for which Elias ploughed a very lonely furrow through most of his lifetime. Because Elias had devoted such prolonged thought to these questions, while for Parsons they came rather as an afterthought ('Question: Who now reads Herbert Spencer? Answer: Talcott Parsons does'), I would have to say that Parsons's writings in this area were rather crude and unsophisticated in comparison with Elias's.

Rather than dwell on that part of Parsons's work, I chose instead to sketch some of the ways in which the two authors differ in matters of basic methodology. It is unavoidable that the

presentation of the issues is a little one-sided. For Parsons probably knew nothing of Elias's work, and certainly never referred to it, let alone commenting on it critically. In contrast, it is possible to quote Elias's own direct criticisms of Parsons. By way of conclusion, indeed, it is worth pointing out the part which Parsons played in the development of Elias's thinking on these matters. Elias's underlying position has remained extraordinarily consistent, being embryonically present as far back as his dispute with Hönigswald. Parsons, in spite of the greater importance he seemed to give to maintaining the appearance of consistency between his earlier and later work,¹² actually varied more: Elias never, for instance, played footsy with behaviourism as Parsons did around the time of *Toward a General Theory of Action*. Nevertheless, to a very considerable extent, it was Parsons's dominance which goaded Elias to work out more explicitly how his views differed from the reigning ones. To that extent Parsons and Elias belonged, in Elias's phrase, to the same 'community of arguments'.

Notes

1. The fullest sources for Elias's life are his autobiographical essay 'Notizen zum Lebenslauf' (1984) and a long interview published in the Dutch weekly newspaper *Vrij Nederland* in the same year. Both are reprinted in *De Geschiedenis van Norbert Elias* (1987c), and I drew on them for the first chapter of my book *Norbert Elias, Civilisation and the Human Self-Image* (Mennell, 1989a). See also Hermann Korte's recent intellectual biography (1988).
2. For example in his critique of Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Elias, 1985b).
3. Leon Mayhew (1982: 11ff) argues that a central theorem throughout Parsons's work is that the structure of social systems consists in its institutionalised normative culture, but that socialisation was central to the process of institutionalisation only in the earlier part of his career; from the 1950s, its place in the theory of institutionalisation of normative culture was increasingly taken by the idea of the hierarchy of control. This does not, however, affect Elias's basic charge that Parsons has nothing very clear to say about the dynamics of long-term processes of change in social relations *and* culture *and* modes of personality formation – all hand in hand with each other. Perhaps Elias makes his point most tellingly in relation to the affectivity/affective neutrality pattern variable (Elias, 1969b: 227) which Parsons sees as a dichotomous choice faced by all actors. Parsons rightly stresses that the capacity for affective neutrality is something which has to be instilled – to some extent at least – during socialisation into *any* culture. Elias rightly recognises that though the terminology is different, the development of this capacity is also one of his own central concerns in *The Civilising Process*. But Elias is also surely right when he contends that whatever Parsons has to say about the structure or sequential order of the *lifetime* socialisation (or 'civilising') process, his conceptual framework does not equip him to handle historical evidence to reveal the growth, decline, and subtle patterning of this capacity (in respect for example of violence or sexuality) in a structured process *from generation to generation*.
4. I have given an account of this aspect of Elias's work in Mennell, 1989a, Chapters 7 and 8.
5. Elias's most extended onslaught on Parsons is found in his 1968 Preface to the second German impression of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*; this is included as an appendix in the

first volume of the English translation of *The Civilising Process*.

6. For a defence of the old view of 'social change', see Robert Nisbet's essay 'Developmentalism: A Critical Analysis' (1970).
7. The German word is *Zustandsreduktion* – literally 'state-reduction'. In consultation with Elias, I translated it in *What is Sociology?* as 'process-reduction', because it is not states which are reduced, but processes that are reduced to states.
8. Readers of *What is Sociology?* should not overlook Elias's elaboration of his remarks on Whorf, linked to a criticism of Lévi-Strauss, which he relegates to a note, printed at pages 179-80.
9. Münch (1981: 727) rightly draws attention to Parsons's debt to Whitehead, which Parsons himself was always very ready to acknowledge.
10. For example, what is signified by the concept 'bourgeoisie' changes very markedly with the development of a social stratum over a period of several centuries; what it means in the nineteenth century is something very different from what it means in the eleventh, yet the two meanings are linked by a long 'continuum of changes' and, used with care, the concept has a clear meaning in context throughout the social process of development. Much the same goes for other concepts like 'sport', 'nobility', or 'concept'. Elias is well aware of this, and therefore avoids the use of ideal-types; he sees greater value in the detailed investigation of a single 'real-type' or case study, such as he undertook in *The Court Society*. A study of that kind does not seek to define the universal features of the concept 'court', but is certainly not 'empty of content' against the concrete reality of history, and invites further comparative and developmental investigations. Note, however, that this does not mean that Elias condemns us to study 'mere history' as an unstructured sequence of events; it is *structured* processes of change, the structure of processes, the sequential order, that has to be investigated. See his introduction, on sociology and history, to *The Court Society* (1969a – not included in French edition).
11. It should not be overlooked that the game models worked out much later and presented in *What is Sociology?* are partly derived from the discussion of phases of state-formation in the second volume of *The Civilising Process*, particularly the 'elimination contest' between small feudal territorial lords.
12. Those who, like Münch (1982), set out to demonstrate that Parsons was highly consistent from beginning to end, seem to me to have more confidence in his consistency than he did himself; I gained the impression that the question caused him much anxiety.