

## Through a Glass, Darkly

I must be one of the very few foreigners – neither Dutch nor Flemish – to be an individual subscriber to the *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*. Who else besides me, and Robert van Krieken down in Sydney? And Robert at least has the excuse, being a second-generation Dutch Australian, of having a decent command of the Dutch language. Apart from a few classes in 1988–9 when I was a Fellow at NIAS, what little Dutch I know seems to have been acquired by osmosis and by – of all things – reading the *AST*.

I have stumbled my way through the *AST* with the help of the English abstracts of Dutch articles that appear in the back of each issue. For quite a few years now, indeed, I have polished up those English abstracts before they went to press. This is not so disinterested a service as it may appear: I realised it was to my personal advantage to clarify the meaning of the summary, so it would be my more reliable guide when I came to decipher the full articles in Dutch. Yet I still saw things, in the words of St Paul, 'through a glass, darkly'.

Of course, the *AST* has always published *some* articles in English – by foreigners, because the Dutch were required to write in Dutch. Among my first encounters with the journal, via photocopies, were Eric Dunning's 'In Defence of Developmental Sociology: A Critique of Popper's Poverty of Historicism with Special Reference to the Theory of Auguste Comte' in 1977 (Eric always loved long titles), and Norbert Elias's 'On the Sociogenesis of Sociology' (a paper dating all the way back to 1962 that eventually found its way into print in the journal in 1984). More recently, the journal has published articles in English by, for example, Randall Collins (1990, 1995, 2000). I suspect that this scattering of articles in English was crucial in drawing attention to the *AST* beyond Dutch-speaking circles.

Even so, to pursue the vitreous line of thought, the *AST* has remained to a large extent hidden behind the 'one-way mirror' that Johan Goudsblom (1986) has used as a metaphor for the plight of Dutch intellectual life more generally. By that he meant that Dutch academics, with their polyglot skills, are abreast of intellectual developments in English, French and German, are thus in a strong position to reflect upon and synthesise them, but then write about them in Dutch – which few of the far more numerous English-, French- and German-speaking academics are able to read. Thus, in spite of Abram de Swaan's having demonstrated (2001) why multilingual people have considerable power

potential, Dutch sociologists have too often (to use a ceramic image this time) modestly hidden their light under a bushel.

I think I first became aware of the existence of the *AST* in 1977 when it was responsible for the publication *Human Figurations*, the *Festschrift* presented to Norbert Elias on his eightieth birthday at a conference in Aachen. I remember the *Festschrift*'s typographical design, if such it could be called, which was the same as the journal's in those days. It was set in 8-point Courier, with unjustified right margins, and was obviously typed on a golf-ball typewriter and then printed from camera-ready copy. At the time, that was simply symptomatic of the need to keep down costs in producing a limited circulation journal in one of the smaller languages. It is a startling reminder of how far the whole technology of the printed page has changed in a quarter of a century. (The drab grey cover of the *Festschrift* was ingeniously designed to look like that of the original 1939 edition of *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* – a subtlety that was lost on me, since I had never seen a first edition, until many years later.)

I really began to read the *AST* systematically – both its current issues and its back-run – from 1985 onwards, when I was writing my book about Elias (Mennell, 1989). Elias had always claimed with his usual modesty (or false modesty) to see his own achievements as merely one step along the road, and in that spirit I wanted to show how his ideas had been taken up and developed by younger sociologists. They included Eric Dunning and his Leicester colleagues in England, focusing mainly but not exclusively on the sociology of sport, and Hermann Korte and Peter Gleichmann and their students in Germany. But the largest and most diverse body of work was that of the so-called Amsterdam School, and its members published above all in the *AST*.

What proved to be a key issue in the Anglophone reception of the whole theory of civilising and decivilising processes was first fully debated in the pages of the *AST* in the 1970s. It concerned the whole question of the so-called 'permissive society', or what Cas Wouters was more exactly to label processes of informalisation. It was no accident that the debate took off in The Netherlands, where the social transformations of the 1960s were perhaps more dramatic and rapid than in most Western countries. How could Elias's theory of the Western civilising process, apparently depicting a long-term trend towards more and more demanding standards of emotion management as the chains of social interdependence lengthened, still be valid when – in a society manifestly no less complex than before – an apparent 'loosening' of morals and manners seemed to represent a reversal of the whole historic trajectory? In 1976, Christien Brinkgreve and Michel Korzec published an article in the *AST* giving an account of the study of the agony column in the women's magazine *Mar-*

*griet*, to be more fully reported in their 1978 book, in which they traced a trend in advice from 'moralising' to 'psychologising'. The question of what their findings implied for the theory of civilising processes was left open. In the next issue, Wouters responded with an article, drawing among other things on the research results presented by Brinkgreve and Korzec, and asking 'Has the civilising process changed direction?', in which he proposed what was to become the thesis he developed in research over the next three decades: that the newer, informalised and superficially looser and more permissive manners and morals actually involve more demanding standards of emotion management. In the same issue, Brinkgreve and Korzec wrote a reply, entitled 'Can the civilising process change direction?', in which they accused Wouters of immunising the theory and of being a true believer. Eventually something like consensus on Wouters's interpretation appears to have emerged (see Brinkgreve, 1980), but Wouters went on to develop his thesis both conceptually and empirically in a whole series of articles written in English, Dutch and German. His first English article was his contribution to the *Festschrift* (1977) and then in the 1980s and 1990s several more appeared, especially in *Theory, Culture and Society* and the *Journal of Social History*. These have culminated in two shortly forthcoming books that trace informalising processes in sexual *moeurs* and in manners more generally in The Netherlands, Germany, Britain and the USA. Meanwhile, back at the *AST*, Arjan Post (2000) updated the original *Margriet weet raad* study, using and testing the theory of informalisation to cover the years 1978-1998.

Next only to the question, raised especially by Zygmunt Bauman (1989), of whether the genocides of the Nazi era invalidate Elias's theory of civilising processes,<sup>1</sup> the debate about 'permissiveness' and informalisation has been central to debates about the theory in the Anglophone world, and the *AST* deserves credit for being the forum in which the issues were first raised.

1 This is not the place to enter into detail about that centrally important issue. Eric Dunning and I (1998) have argued that Bauman (and others such as Edmund Leach) have fundamentally misconstrued Elias's theory. In our view, Elias's *Studien über die Deutschen* (1989) comes a great deal closer to explaining why the Nazi genocides happened when and where they did than does Bauman. Ultimately, perhaps Anton Hemerijck (in private conversation) was right to ask 'what body of sociological theory *does* deal adequately with it?' It should be noted that Bauman was writing before the publication of *Studien über die Deutschen*.

Another great debate arising in the pages of the *AST* (and in *Sociologische Gids*, with which it is now to merge) that absorbed my attention was the fallout from the annual conference of the Dutch and Flemish sociologists and anthropologists in 1981. That was the famous occasion when Anton Blok, thitherto the principal advocate in Dutch anthropology of Elias's ideas – along with Johan Goudsblom in sociology and Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh in political science – suddenly launched a stinging attack on them from a much more conventional anthropologist's viewpoint. I had heard the explosions from the other side of the North Sea, but had to struggle through Nico Wilterdink's conference report in the 1982 *AST* to gain any impression of what it had all been about (see Mennell, 1989: 228–34 for what I made of it). But even now I am not very sure. The pivotal paper was Blok's discussion of the traditional Victorian conceptual dichotomy between 'primitive' and 'civilised', published in *Sociologische Gids* (1982). But Elias never used that distinction, and his discussion of *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* in Part I of *The Civilising Process* is to be understood as dealing with meanings at the emic level, while the rest of the book attempts to give the concept of civilisation an etic value as a social scientific concept – that is, dealing with the real changes to which emic evaluations became attached. The conference debate was evidently heated, but out of it, at least for me, came some illumination as well. From Wilterdink's report I picked out the contributions of Ton Zwaan, Eddie Szirmai and Cas Wouters. The central issue was and is whether it is possible to develop measuring rods for civilising or decivilising processes that can meet the criteria necessary for their use by social scientists. The debate continued over many years, most recently in Wouters's 1997 article on 'criteriology', and Wilterdink's response to it. So far as I understood these disputes, second-hand and through a language of which I have scant knowledge, they helped me to take the matter of measuring rods a little further, especially in my thinking about the problems of comparing civilising processes in Asia and Europe (Mennell, 1989: 232–4; 1990; Goudsblom, Jones & Mennell, 1996: 101–34). More than two decades later, it is still not quite clear exactly why feelings ran so high, or why Anton Blok (with whom I have always remained on the best of terms, and who has since dealt perfectly evenly with Elias's ideas) took the line he did. I suspect the general enthusiasm (in the eighteenth-century sense) of the Eliasians simply became provocative to other, professionally sceptical, social scientists.

So the *AST* has had a fine and distinguished record, as indeed has the considerably older *Sociologische Gids*. Their merger stems in part from a recognition of the economic exigencies of producing a relatively small-circulation journal in a relatively small language at a time when costs are rising and

subscriptions falling – and, moreover, when the internet is posing questions that publishers and editors are not yet sure how to answer. But the merger also poses questions about the survival of the kind of humanistic sociology that both journals have long published. In The Netherlands, and also in the United Kingdom, that kind of sociology is being squeezed, although from different directions. Speaking of the British scene, Richard Kilminster has made an ingenious connection between the theory of informalisation and the sociology of knowledge and the sciences:

The younger practitioners in sociology will probably experience their relations with others, inside and outside their institutional, professional and sociological relations, in ways that make the methodological imperative of greater detachment and suspension of value-judgements, pursued rigorously and in its pure form alone, seem simply inflexible and even authoritarian. On the other hand, sociologists still wedded exclusively to the greater detachment, fantasy-control, ideology-banishing model of scientific activity will find the contemporary kinds of sociological activities and preferences (...) decidedly disconcerting. To them, those research trends and attitudes will seem strange, unrigorous and uncontrolled, constituting a dangerous blurring of the much-fought-for clear boundary between scientific knowledge and personal and lay experience. This boundary was always previously policed by a more predominantly repressive, prohibiting superego, the character of which, and its relationship to other psychic functions, have now arguably been transformed as social dividing lines have opened up (...) (2004: 38).

Although Kilminster went on to reach a relatively optimistic conclusion, concluding that what he called 'sociologists of contemporary sensibility' may, by 'embracing a higher level of more differentiated self-control (...) be better able than earlier generations of sociologists to live with this seeming incongruity', difficulties remain.

What Kilminster is getting at here may or may not be peculiar to the British scene. If I may put it less elegantly but more directly, what he is alluding to is that the Departments of Sociology in most British universities seem to have succumbed to the dreaded 'social theory', as Antony Giddens and his followers call it. The result is what Elias called 'philosophoidal' sociology, with a high ratio of speculative conceptualising and advocacy over sound empirical evidence. The trend can be seen in the pages of *Theory, Culture and Society* over recent years, when it has published fewer articles of a 'figurational' cast than it did in its early days.

However, Ruud Stokvis (2004), reviewing the book in which Kilminster's essay appears, expressed surprise at the suggestion that there is emerging

a kind of 'controlled decontrolling of social controls' [R.S.] in the standards of detachment of younger sociologists, that would disconcert older sociologists, who cling more inflexibly to standards of detachment. In my experience most young sociologists cling more firmly to standards of detachment than ever. That is the reason they turn away from qualitative studies of long-term processes and prefer the strict measurement of variables connected with ahistorically formulated problems, often phrased in terms of rational action theory.

And that may be truer of the Netherlands, where 'scientism' or 'physics envy' seems especially strong, perhaps because the kind of 'cultural studies' inspired by French and German philosophers tends to be contained in the humanities departments and to overlap to some extent with communication studies. They have their own academic networks, largely separate from those of Dutch sociologists. Thus, any differences between The Netherlands and Britain may simply reflect differences in the organisation of academe; in Britain, it is often the exponents of large data bases and rational choice theory who are organised separately in their own research institutes and networks (see Goldthorpe, 2000).

A final reflection: Norbert Elias, both in Britain and The Netherlands, in effect sought to establish (among other things) a rigorously-based form of 'cultural studies'; but the field that adopted that name took its bearings in the event from Birmingham, Frankfurt and Paris rather than from Leicester and Amsterdam. And those of us whose intellectual outlook was so strongly shaped by him and by the international network of like-minded friends that arose from the 1970s onwards may end up feeling crushed between bloated conceptualisers on the one hand and unimaginative number-crunchers on the other. Yet it seems to me that there is no sign of any decline in the intellectual vigour and output of us piggies in the middle. So let us wish the newly merged Dutch journal health and long life, and help to ensure it by submitting our best work to it for publication.

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