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## [Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities] The Role of Group Charisma and Group Disgrace

*Abstract:* The paper deals with production and reproduction of social inequalities in Elias' sociology. For him, the key for any sociological approach to these issues is the use of the concept of *social figuration* and of the asymmetrical dynamics of «disposition» which drive it. In this essay we will try to decipher these themes (and the more general approach underlying them), starting from the reading of a little known text by Elias which was published only partially; i.e. the speech on the concept of *charisma* which he gave at the conference organized by the German Sociological Association on the occasion of the centenary of Max Weber's birth. Starting from the discussion of this peculiar text the papers underline the eliasian position respect to the very famous weberian category. The Eliasian key thought is revealed in all its heuristic potentiality because of its ability to stimulate - in a processual way - static and ideal-typical patterns of analysis. The paper is articulated in three main points. The first concerns the leadership and the role it can play, not only as a source of change but also as a mechanism of social reproduction. Elias purifies the concept of charisma from its metaphysically magical and irrational components - emphasizing the mechanisms of institutionalization of the revolutionary force to which that concept refers - showing the dynamics of construction, protection and waterproofing of the boundaries of power groups made possible by the action of the leader and his followers. The second point concerns the processes of stigmatization and labeling that «crystallize» the system of inequalities, giving them an ideological appearance of normality and incontrovertibility. The third point concerns the contribute to the development of a thought capable of going beyond traditional conceptual dichotomies. The discussion on charisma and inequalities allow us to merge rational and emotional, individual and collective, natural and social aspects of social life in the way how practically they are revealed and can be studied.

*Keywords:* Social inequalities, Charisma, Elias.

The first problem when tackling the issue of production and reproduction of social inequalities in Elias' work is deciding where to start from. On the one hand it is difficult to find a text where the author addresses this issue per se, while on the other it is a theme which pervades his entire work. From the well-known *The Civilizing Process* to unpublished or recently published works, the author continually wrestles with what can be defined *the problem of sociology*.

Class stratification and functional differentiation appear as central themes in *The Court Society*, *The established and Outsiders*, *The Germans* and various essays. They also play a fundamental role in Elias's magnum opus, *The Civilising Process* (Loyal 2004: 125).

In these texts, as underlined by Loyal, Elias confronts the concepts of class, rank and social stratification, analyzing and discussing Marx and Weber's ideas on the genesis of modern society. However, in line with the approach used throughout his intellectual journey, he argues for the abandonment of static conceptual categories such as those mentioned above, in favour of a more dynamic reading of social processes, through which inequalities arise and are transformed. And he does so by using concepts which are typical of his epistemological approach, and which attempt to bring together different elements which make up the concrete existence of human beings. This approach is very clear when the author addresses the issue of social stratification and the emergence of new social positions related to new professions, as, for example, in *The Genesis of Naval profession*, as well as when he tackles the issue of gender inequality (Elias 1987, cfr. Brinkgreve 2004). It is also present when he tackles racial

inequalities, as, for example, in the theoretical essay in the second edition of *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994, cfr. Dunning 2004).

In all these cases, the dimension of power is central, i.e. differences in the distribution of power between individuals and groups, and the resulting different possibilities/ability to influence the actions and lives of others. At the root of stratification systems there is a shifting balance in authority which can manifest itself in different ways, historically and geographically, but which always has a relational character.

For Elias, the key for any sociological approach to the issue of inequality is the use of the concept of *social figuration* and of the asymmetrical dynamics of «disposition» which drive this. From this angle, the disparity in resources that distinguishes different actors and their different ability to reciprocally influence each other's behavior, stems not only from their different situations and the given circumstances or context in which they act strategically (the «macro» perspective); and not only from their unilateral ability (rooted in the presumed irreducible intentionality of the individual) to use the constraints and opportunities of belonging to networks to carry out their projects (the «micro» perspective). Rather they stem from the complex of *social mechanisms* through which individuals present themselves to each other, the environment in which they operate, and which shapes their mutual expectations, decisions on how and what to improve in their fortunes, or to what extent to maintain or defend their positions<sup>1</sup>. In a complex meso-analytical interplay between *psycho-socio-genesis* of collective phenomena (the manner in which the morphology of a historically-determined social figuration marks individual actors' character and perceptions, and re-produces itself by way of processes set in motion by them), Elias identifies in an original way (original compared to the sociological tradition of that time but also compared to our current tradition) both the rational and emotional components of behaviour. These latter are less predictable and more rooted in *forms of life* or «belonging», which shape desires, priorities, utility functions and motivations of which we are more or less immediately conscious.

Stratification, inequality, up- and downward mobility are - from this point of view - the result of considered choices, complex decisions, more or less complex costs/benefit analyses; but, at the same time, of introspective and instinctive needs for recognition, acceptance, social inclusion, conflicting communication with the groups and their members, to which one is bound in everyday interaction. This result can never be taken for granted and is never final (but is also neither «disordered» nor unintelligible).

In this essay we will try to decipher these issues (and the more general approach underlying them), starting from the reading of a little known text by Elias which was published only partially; i.e. the speech on the concept of *charisma* which he gave at the conference organized by the German Sociological Association on the occasion of the centenary of Max Weber's birth. At first glance, our choice may seem rather unusual. In Weber's work, charisma refers to an essentially «irrational» component of action, which rises in times of institutional crisis, social and cultural decline in order to radically put into question frameworks of the established order, and to disrupt the stranglehold of bureaucratic organization and its codification of balances of power. It represents, in short, a source of change rather than a factor contributing to stratification and reproduction of social inequality. Yet, a key part of Elias' thinking is revealed - with all its heuristic potential - in his ability to add a dynamic element to the static and ideal-typical patterns of analysis, by referring to processes in an authentically sociological way; and to use - drawing on Simmel's work - the principle of *reciprocal causation*, which means not only revealing the interdependence of social phenomena, but also the unveiling of symmetrical and opposite meanings in the same historical events. Three points will emerge in the discussion, which we summarize here to help guide the reader.

The first concerns leadership and the role it can play, not only as a source of change but also as a mechanism of social reproduction. Through a selective and highly original reinterpretation of some pages of the *Sociology of Religions* by Weber, Elias underlines both the fully relational nature of the phenomenon of charisma, as well

<sup>1</sup> All individual purposes give birth to society in an unplanned way. In the determination of individual goals central is the idea of quest for survival. It occurs not only in biological terms (although these have not an irrelevant importance) but also with regard to the survival of communities, workplaces, social groups, cultures, lifestyles, customs. It is precisely in response to the different needs of survival that historically people have generated changing «unit of survival», meaning by this expression all forms of social unions between individuals (families, tribes, states, etc. ...). People therefore react and act also under the fear that our world disappears, that there is a risk in relation to our survival. (Giovannini, Perulli 2012: 138-142).

as its role of «closure» and reproduction of class interests and ruling elites. This latter occurs exactly due to its social «constitution» and the power dynamics which inevitably underpin it. Elias is never satisfied with the largely unilateral and mutually exclusive interpretations of social inequalities offered by the Marxian, Elitist and Actionalist schools of thought. Our author rather purifies the concept of charisma from its metaphysically magical and irrational components - emphasizing the mechanisms of institutionalization of the revolutionary force to which the concept refers - and shows (with the category of *Gentilcharisma*) the dynamics of construction, protection and «waterproofing» of the boundaries of group power, which are made possible by the action of the leader and his followers. Years later, the distinction between personal charisma and group charisma - which stems from the distinction between a creative/innovative and a reproductive/routine leadership - echoes not just some analyses of the sociology of organizations (the difference between formal leadership of line management and the informal leadership of staff, made by Amitiai Etzioni); but also helps to highlight the relationships between characteristics of economic and cultural classes, and to delve deeper into the problem of the (lack of) turnover of elites, which Mosca considered the main factor explaining change (or dysfunctional reproduction) of the ruling class.

The second point - more immediately linked to power dynamics and how they are re-enforced - concerns the processes of stigmatization and of labeling that «crystallize» the system of inequalities, endowing them with an ideology of normality and making them non-controversial. Anyone who re-reads the *labeling theorists* will find in this example of Elias' work, approaches which are as relevant as ever to understand the reasons - which are on the whole still under-investigated - behind the creation of prejudices and stereotypes, and their transformation and accreditation as simplifying, fungible, marginalizing cultural frameworks; and above all of the more or less conscious mechanisms through which these distinguishing features are «legitimized» by those at whom they are directed. The Eliasian study of Winston Parva - quoted several times in the following pages - dilutes the reified logic of power relations (always historically determined by the boundaries of interdependencies within which uneven balances occur) and looks at the complex sequences of actions, reactions, images and counter-representations that find their *raison d'être* on the one side in the attempt of the Established to preserve their collective identity cultivated over the long term; and on the other in the symmetric need (which is not less strategic, defensive, and orientated at a gradual acquisition of authority), for acceptance, inclusion and (more existentially) recognition on the part of the outsiders.

Overall - the last point to which we draw the reader's attention - all of Elias' analysis seems to be driven by his constant concern - epistemological and theoretical - to contribute to the articulation of an approach capable of going beyond the traditional conceptual dichotomies which classical sociology (but also to a large extent contemporary sociology) has nurtured and continues to draw on. «Individual and Society», «nature and culture», «global» manifestations of social phenomena and the local nature in which they manifest themselves and can be studied: all of these combinations which for Elias are the result of distorted reasoning. (For him they are also certainly sociologically understandable as they stem from historically determined forms of social figurations). Only a vivid scientific *imagination* can help to disperse and to overcome such distorted reasoning. Imagination is needed - as we are trying to do in this essay - to study the order and structures of inequalities, starting, paradoxically, from one of the main analytical categories traditionally used to analyze social change.

### *Towards a sociological definition of charisma*

It is broadly accepted that we owe to Weber the most articulate study of the charisma concept in sociological thought (Cavalli 1981, in particular the first part). And for his essay<sup>2</sup> Elias starts with Weber's work. The first part

<sup>2</sup> The year 1964 marked the centenary of Max Weber's birth. For its celebration the Sociological German Association organized the annual congress in Heidelberg. Elias participation was his first appearance in the sphere of German sociology since 1933, when he left Germany owing to the racial persecutions against Jewish intellectuals. The paper was called *Group Charisma and group disgrace* and it represented for him the opportunity to reflect, starting from the author to which the conference was dedicated, to the concept of charisma in order to read mechanisms of social exclusion found in a small English working-class community. The contribution was not included in the «transactions of the conference» (Stammer 1971 in Mennel's introduction to Elias essays, 2009: xii) for reasons that have to be brought back both to Elias's marginality within the German academy and to the paper's characteristics, for its length and style «it

contains a detailed discussion of the Weberian concept of charisma representing «a rather rare example in Elias» writings of a long textual critique and interpretation of another sociologist» (Mennel in Elias 2009: xii)<sup>3</sup>. The points raised by Elias can be substantially reduced to three, and they are all aimed at strengthening his own strictly sociological approach and use of the charisma concept. The first point is semantic<sup>4</sup>, and concerns the nature of the qualities evoked by the use of this term. Elias stresses its limits for sociological analysis due to the fact that this expression is understood as a pre-social, innate quality of exceptional individuals. He recognizes the enormous potential opened up by Weber's discussion of charisma, both individual and group charisma, but he argues that this potential is limited:

Max Weber's usage of the concept has acquired some highly personal implications connected with his own transient partisan ideas in the struggles of his own time. One cannot proceed with the use and development of the concept charisma as a general sociological concept without glancing at some of the older magical associations which Max Weber himself was not able to cast aside (Elias 2009: 77).

At first glance it may seem surprising that an author such as Elias - attentive to the socio-historical dimension of all phenomena and ways of living together, from specific sociologically visible forms of human beings, including social scientists - emphasizes this kind of limit to Weber's analysis. In fact, Elias raises two issues which are dear to him. The first is the relationship between sociology and social phenomenon. This particular interweaving between involvement and inevitable necessity of detachment is typical for the social scientist. From this point of view Elias underlines how the difficulty to lose the ambiguity of the concept can be connected to the excessive involvement and the resulting lack of detachment showed by Weber (Elias 1987). This meant that he placed limits on the heuristic and analytical capacity of the concept which he put forward<sup>5</sup>. The second problem is related to the scientific concept. The criticism is not so much directed at the presence of emotional factors<sup>6</sup> in Weber's approach, but at the fact that the author does not put them in historical context, and does not consider those aspects as the result of a clear social and historical development and the particular position of the individual- Weber - in the society of his time. But we will come back to this theme later.

Elias considers the motivations behind Weber's involvement, and considers them to be to a certain extent unavoidable. This consideration of the inevitability of ambivalence due to the involvement of the observer, allows Elias to stress a methodological aspect which is typical of his theoretical approach. This is the need to overcome the dichotomous approach in sociological analysis through the consideration of relations and the mutual influence of different aspects of lives of human beings, and the relationship between observed reality and analytical tools.

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was not easy to accommodate in a volume of conference proceedings» (Mennel in Elias 2009: xii). Such paper has long been unpublished, and it appeared in the collection of essays edited by R. Kilminster and S. Mennell (ibidem). Yet, despite the provisional character of this writing, its disorganicity, its polemical tone, it contains some features of Elias's thought on which I think it might be worth dwelling. Particularly for the relationship that Elias emphasizes between the charismatic dimension and the mechanisms, which underlie social inequalities, through a unique interweaving of individual and collective, emotional and rational, theoretical and empirical elements, that are characteristic for this author. Different versions of the paper can be found in the Marbach Archive. I wish to thank The Norbert Elias Foundation for giving me the permission to consult the typescripts and the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach a.N. for the Norbert Elias Stipendium that allowed me to spend some weeks in Marbach deepening my study.

3 It is well-known that Elias is moderate in the use of notes and explicit references to other authors.

4 Elias's sociology is characterized by the analysis of words meanings, in their common sense and for the scientific reflection.

5 «Max Weber in his attachment to the ideal of a great leader was thus an individual representative of a specific social and National tradition. The attachment had strong emotional roots; it was closely associated with his patriotism, with his overriding concern for Germany's fate, particularly in the years just before and after the end of the 1914-18 war. This specific emotional involvement undoubtedly provided the driving force for Weber's interest in the problems of great leader figures. That he could gradually detach himself from the emotional core of his experience» (Elias 2009: 79), which, as we shall see later, it will decrease during the development of Weber's thought. See also the long footnote where Elias tries to connect some of Weber's personal affairs for which he proposes analytical elaborations.

6 In Elias «emotions are embedded [...] in the theory to show the connection between natural and cultural aspects of human existence and the idea that the individual and society [...] are not two separated data» (Corigliano 2001: 33).



The concept of charisma as presented by Max Weber was bound to be ambiguous, since it combined pre-scientific and almost mystical features stemming from Weber's involvements, with more impressive scientific views resulting from his strenuous efforts at greater detachment. This shows how illusory are the traditional static and absolute polarities such as «ideology» and «truth», «subjectivity» and «objectivity», «value judgment» and «value-free judgment». On the basis of such absolute priorities one is compelled to ask: if Weber's concept of charisma was «socially conditioned», if it was the elaboration of a social ideal and part of a political ideology, how can it be «true» or objective? How can it have any scientific function and relevance? The answer is simple: it would be obvious enough if our habits of thinking did not enjoin us to expect an answer in terms of exclusive and static alternatives, and did not block as almost irrelevant the perception of what occurs in actual fact - of what could be observed and demonstrated if our traditions of thinking allowed it - the fact that, under certain conditions, people can improve the appropriateness of their thinking and the correspondence of their concepts to observable data. Weber's introduction of the term «charismatic» as a sociological term for a specific type of leadership was such a step. He developed a magical-theological [concept] into a scientific concept. But, as he remained to some extent a captive of one of the social religions of his time, his concept in turn remained an hybrid - it remained magical-scientific in character. One has to go beyond him; one can improve the concept still further. (Elias 2009: 79-80)<sup>7</sup>

As is well-known, Weber puts forward different definitions of the term «charisma» in his work (Bendix 1960, Cavalli 1981, Eisenstadt 1968). Elias points to three of them, emphasizing an interpretation which is in a certain sense an evolution of Weber's thought: gradually transforming the concept of charisma from a magic-theological to a scientific concept, as is mentioned in the passage quoted above. The first refers to the definition proposed by Weber on the studies of Indian society which refers to «a personal qualification ... which originally was thought to be purely magical and was generally regarded as extraordinary, or at least not universally accessible to human beings» (Weber in Elias 2009: 76). According to Elias, this definition - and the whole excerpt from which it is taken - «shows clearly the initial ambiguity of Weber's concept» (Weber in Elias 2009: 77) and therefore he asks:

Is charisma, in point of fact, an extraordinary, unexplainable and somewhat mysterious gift of certain individuals which Max Weber himself accepted as such and which we are meant to accept in the same way? Or does the concept refer to the fact that in certain situations the followers or individuals who play, or aspire to [play], a leading role in their group - and perhaps these individuals themselves - believe that they have been graced with a special gift which cannot be explained in the way in which one explains the faculties of ordinary men? In other words: does the concept «charisma» refer to a specific - not, however, explainable - quality of people, or to a certain social configurations within which people who are able to possess these qualities assume or perform the role of leader and exercise authority? (Elias 2009: 77).

Elias states that such questions cannot be resolved in the references above, and even in the definitions that Weber puts forward in other works, such as in the introduction to *The economic ethic of world religions*, where he writes «In the studies that follow, charisma shall mean an extraordinary quality of a person regardless of whether it is real or supposed or imagined» (Weber in Elias 2009: 78). This definition represents the second quotation reported by Elias, and it is followed by a third one in which «the question of the magical or psychological reality of the charisma disappeared from view» (Elias 2009: 78), with only the sociological dimension remaining. In *Economy and Sociology* Weber defines charisma as a quality «evaluated as something out of the ordinary on account of which a person is assessed as having super-natural or super-human, or at any rate extraordinary powers or properties not accessible to any other person» (Weber in Elias 2009: 78, italics by Elias). Together with the downsizing of the magical-psychological dimension, there is an insistence on what we could define as the relational aspect of the charismatic dimension. It is just this aspect that Elias interprets as a sign of the new prevalence of the sociological dimension. Charisma changes from being a «possessed» quality to a «recognized» quality. This

<sup>7</sup> Further on he clarifies his thinking «The relationship between ideological and scientific, fantasy-centred and reality-centred, involved and detached ways of thinking is not an «either-or» relationship; it has not the form of a static polarity between two opposites of which one can apply in any particular case only to the complete exclusion of the other, but that of a process of changes in a specific direction - of a development with many transitional stages. At present such stages can be diagnosed only as blends or alloys of polar conceptual structures from which a concept moves away, or towards which it moves, at a given stage of its development and which blend or amalgamate at different stages in different forms and degrees» (Elias 2009: 80).

presupposes a social relationship between those who have it, and those who acknowledge ownership of the quality, and leads to a shift in the dynamics of social interactions or, in Elias words, in social interdependencies.

### *Individual charisma and group charisma*

The second point discussed by Elias – which is also designed to highlight the sociological nature of the concept of charisma - is the possibility that charisma is attributed to a single individual not because of his particular qualities, but because he belongs to a certain group. Weber himself points out that charismatic qualities can be transmitted by inheritance and through the institutionalization of charisma. Elias moves on from Weber's concept of *Gentilcharisma* to propose the use of the term «group charisma»<sup>8</sup>. In the section dedicated to *The role of kinship group and casts* Weber emphasizes how the social order is based on what we may call *Gentilcharisma*. He writes:

This means in this context that a personal qualification - a «charisma»- which originally was thought to be purely magical and was generally regarded as extraordinary, or at least not universally accessible to human beings, was attributed to members of a clan as such and not only, as it initially was, to a particular person. We have remnants of the sociologically very important conception above all in the hereditary rights of our dynasties to rule by «the grace of God». To a lesser extent every legendary tale about the special quality of the «blood» of all kinds of aristocracies which regard themselves as pure, whatever their origin, belongs to the same type. This conception is one of the ways in which the initially purely actual and personal charisma becomes routinised. The warrior king and his followers were heroes who distinguished themselves from other men by purely personal magical qualifications which had been demonstrated by their success; the authority of the war leader itself, just as that of the sorcerer, was initially based on a strictly personal charisma alone. The successor too, claimed authority initially on the strength of a purely personal charisma (Weber in Elias 2009: 76).

There are thus modalities which mark the transition from individual to group charisma. According to Weber these are essentially three (we can find them also in other parts of the same work): the designation of a qualified successor by the current holder of charisma; the determination of a successor by the followers (princes, cardinals); and, particularly important for the line of thought developed by Elias:

the victory of the obvious belief that the charisma was the property of a kinship group as such, that the qualified person or persons had to be found within this group. This formed the transition to the hereditary character of the *Gentilcharisma* with which it originally had nothing to do ... In that way it became possible to evaluate as rooted in a magical group a charisma not only heroic and priestly - ritual qualifications ... but positions of authority of many kinds... (Weber in Elias 2009: 76).

In Weber, as later in Elias, the possession of noble charismatic qualities is linked directly to a dimension of power and authority:

All groups within that society who claimed for themselves an elevated rank (by comparisons with others) were induced to model themselves on the highest group ... and the principle of the heredity of social position, ritual duties, way of life and occupation gave to the group charismatic principle as an attribute of every position of authority its final and decisive sanction (Weber in Elias 2009: 77).

Weber also points out that in Western European feudalism kinship groups played a minor role compared to class membership.<sup>9</sup> Actually Elias refers to this passage, and develops the idea that charisma can exist not just

<sup>8</sup> See what Bendix writes about «Familial and Institutional Charisma» (1960: 308-318). Elsewhere, the parallels between Elias's and Bendix's interpretations of Weber's thought should be deepened, as some letters found in the Deutsche Literatur Archive suggest (DLA 32.6.3 Bendix R.).

<sup>9</sup> Weber instead stresses the fact that in India unlike in the West, in many cases a charismatic usurper with his followers could blow up the strong team of old kinship groups, however the development always led again on the way to the *Gentilcharisma* organization of noble lineages and kinship groups. As *Gentilcharisma* was the basis of the caste, so in turn the caste supported the charisma of kinship group.

in exceptional personalities, but also in ordinary individuals who acquire it not because they are endowed with special qualities, but simply because they belong to certain social groups, be these families, clans, classes or other groups. Elias searches out those passages in Weber's work where use of the term refers not only to kinship groups (family, clan charisma, sib-charisma), but also to the wholeness of a caste or aristocracy of blue blood groups: in short, groups of people united by bonds which are not kinship bonds. He concludes:

What he [Weber] has to say about *Gentilcharisma* is, in some respects, of such a general nature that one does not stretch his concept unduly if one speaks of «group charisma»; and as I wish to stress the general nature of the phenomenon, that is the term I propose to use here (Elias 2009: 73).

### *Charisma and disgrace in the figurational game*

The third point raised by Elias regarding Weber's concept of charisma concerns the so-called separate use made of this category. We have just dealt with the different approach regarding the owner of the particular quality. But we must remember that Elias distances himself from Weber in two ways. Firstly, as we have seen, Elias stresses the sociological and not «natural» of what are considered exceptional qualities. These are not qualities which in themselves are «good», but qualities which in order to be able to be translated into significant sociological effects must be recognized as such<sup>10</sup>. They are a source of authority: they assign, strengthen, empower people to keep certain positions within different social figurations involving different actors. Charisma is both the result and driver of social relationships, and not an inherent quality on the basis of which social relations are forged. Secondly, what is considered charismatic cannot be understood without considering at the same time the quality with which it is contrasted<sup>11</sup>. In other words, we find here the insistence on relational aspects of the analytical concepts used, which is typical of Elias' approach. Elias underlines the need to use the term «charisma» along with its opposite, without leaving in the shadow, as in his opinion Weber also does, «the other side of the coin, such as group contempt, ostracism, disgrace and denigration, which to this day have attracted relatively little attention as sociologically significant phenomena» (Elias 2009: 74). Too often, Elias argues, these are treated in contemporary sociology in separate compartments, attributed to different categories, sometimes classified as «group prejudices», «and in that case, they on their part are usually explored without reference to the charismatic claims of the «prejudiced» groups. They may be studied under such names as «racialism» or «nationalism» (Elias 2009: 74). The same applies to studies of the stigmatization of groups or individuals.

In order to understand why certain features can be perceived in charismatic terms and transformed into actions and have potential influence on the perceptions of others, we need to consider the interdependencies between those who are invested with these qualities and those who are excluded, including those who hold on the basis of these qualities a position of relatively greater power, and those who - by recognizing this superiority - serve to reinforce it. In other words, we need what Elias defines a figurational approach, which can capture all the elements which mutually influence each other. With the concept of figuration the interdependencies among individuals are placed at the center of sociological analysis, as well as their mutual influence on each other, within a framework of action limited by the spatial-temporal conditions in which the interdependencies and mutual influence occurs. The figuration is presented as an interconnection of actions performed by a group of individuals in dynamic interdependence, always in a specific historical and social context. Actions are observed as they take place in practice. In figurations in fact real people come into play (with their specific biological, cultural, social, psychological characteristics, with their backgrounds and their aspirations) - and not individuals conceived in the abstract - acting within rules more or less formalized, which they interpret and help to strengthen or change. Every

<sup>10</sup> This idea is strongly supported by Elias.

<sup>11</sup> «Without some sense of the unity of the structure in the variety of relationships such as those, and of the corresponding attitudes and beliefs – which, at present, are usually classified under a multitude of separate headings, often as if they had nothing to do with each other – the study of each of them must suffer. Sooner or later, one will have to develop a unified theoretical framework, a unified model or, to use Max Weber's own term, an "ideal type" of "stablished-outsider relationships" - with their concomitants, group charisma and group disgrace – probably in the form of a continuum extending between two poles» (Elias 2009: 75).



individual pursues his/her own goals, and acts within boundaries that are shaped by historical, geographical, social conditions, of where he/she was born. The (individual and collective) past inevitably influences him/her, as does the future toward which the individual strives. These boundaries are also represented in the social *habitus*, which connects different individuals within the figuration. It represents the common space that different individuals share together<sup>12</sup>, as well as the shared norms and rules that individuals make their own. Moreover, with the idea of figuration, Elias focuses on the dimension of power, which is also conceived in relational terms (Heiland, Ludemann 1991, Perulli 2011). Within the figuration there is in fact a shifting distribution of power, conditioned by the changing ability to influence (facilitate/hinder) the choices, actions and desires of others. Multiple tools can be used for this purpose, but an important role is played by the dynamics of belonging to one's own group, which in turn influences the creation of one's personal identity. Here, according to Elias, the individual oscillates between an I-identity and a we-identity, between the need to differentiate oneself within the group, and a need to belong to a collective group. (Elias 1991, in part. Chapter 3). In these dynamics an important role can be played by group charisma and group disgrace. This is the search of the individual for the approval of others within the figuration, and the attempt to avoid disapproval. This is also one of the ways used by those who are in a position of relative power in relation to others in the group to establish and maintain boundaries, to retain and strengthen existing power differentials.

The relational approach theorized by Elias offers the possibility of placing the problem of charisma and group disgrace within the broader reproduction of social inequality. It is not a coincidence that the use of the categories of group charisma and group disgrace form part of a research that questions the mechanisms of social inequality within an apparently homogenous community.

#### *Reproduction mechanisms of social differences*

In the last part of *The Civilizing Process* Elias starts to develop a series of ideas about the relations between social inequalities, power chance, the structure of personality, life styles and cultural expressions which found a more extended and articulated study in the research on the community of Wiston Parva, a fictitious name for a suburb of Leicester in England (Elias, Scotson 2004).

Looking at the elements which mark the emergence and decline of social groups which hold a position of relatively greater power, Elias refuses to adopt both the Weberian and Marxist approach (Mennel 1992, in part. Chapter 5). He explicitly rejects the premise that everything can be reduced to issues of control over economic sources of power. Implicitly he also rejects the concept of class, status and party as three factors or dimensions of the distribution of chance of power. Rather the mutual influence of creation processes of meaning and power are considered central<sup>13</sup>. For Elias power, as noted above, is a property generated by figurations of all social interdependencies. The study on the small community of Winston Parva looks precisely at how to understand the mechanisms that generate and explain the power differentials at the community level and, more generally, what might explain the forms of differentiation and social segregation. It is here that adopting analytical categories such as group charisma and group disgrace are found to be particularly useful. What Weber noticed in his studies of the Indian caste system turned out to be an extreme form of a type of relation that can be found in many other societies. If one looks only at Indian cases, and in particular those related to the ratio of Brahmin castes and pariahs in order to prove the existence of group charisma and group disgrace, the phenomena can be considered foreign and unusual, although they are actually part of the reality in which we live (Elias 2001). To deal with them on a smaller scale, Elias says, offers several advantages: first, we have empirical observation of the ways and pace in

12 As it is well-known the *habitus* for Elias is the social structure of personality. It leads to what is acquired during a process of socialization and which is common to most individuals who live in certain social groups. Although every individual is different from the other, he/she bears, however, specific marks with other people who belong to his/her group. «This make-up, the social habitus of individual forms, as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society» (Elias 1994: 54).

13 Heinrich (1997: 78) underlines how Elias rejects the use of the term «élite» for qualifying the dominant group as, for him, it refers to static qualities.

which a group matures and consolidates a desire for group charisma, accompanied by the parallel imposition of a mark, a sort of collective blame on the antagonist group, and secondly, the deepening of the links between group charisma and group disgrace. From this point of view the study on Winston Parva can be seen as a step towards considering group charisma group and group disgrace as two poles of a single *continuum* that reflect the degree of approval/disapproval in the figurational game. In the figuration of group established/outside, group charisma and group disgrace are complementary and they are one of the most significant features of such a figuration.<sup>14</sup> Such complementarities provide:

a clue to the emotional barrier against closer contact with the outsiders set up by this kind of figuration among the established. Perhaps more than anything else, this emotional barrier accounts for the often extreme rigidity in the attitude of established groups towards outsider groups – for the perpetuation of this taboo against closer contact with the outsiders for generation after generation, even if their social superiority or, in other words, their power surplus diminishes. (Elias 1994: xxii).

This is what calls «emotional rigidity», examples of which can be found in the perpetuation of the exclusion of untouchables in India even after the formal abolition of castes, or the exclusion of blacks in America after the abolition of slavery (Mennel 1992: 129-131). The use of the dimension group charisma- group disgrace allows Elias to emphasize the close relationship between holding a certain position of power within the figurational game, and considering the holder of this position in terms of good/ bad, better/worse. And this qualification becomes so obvious, especially when it is reified through the use of distinctive concretely observable signs, which can obscure the power relationship that supports it.<sup>15</sup>

Thus one encountered here, in the small community of Winston Parva, as it were in miniature, a universal human theme. One can observe again and again that members of groups which are, in terms of power, stronger than other interdependent groups, think of themselves in human terms as better than the others. The literal meaning of the term «aristocracy» can serve as an example. It was a name which Athenian upper class of slave-owning warriors applied to that type of power relation in Athens which enabled their own group to take up the ruling position. But it meant literally «rule of the best». To this day the term «noble» retains the double meaning of high social rank and of a highly valued human attitude, as in «a noble gesture»; just as «villain», derived from a term that applied to a social group of low standing and, therefore, of low human value, still retains its meaning in the latter sense – an expression for a person of low morals. It is easy to find other examples.

This is the normal self-image of groups who in terms of their power ratio are securely superior to other interdependent groups. Whether they are social cadres, such as feudal lords in relation to villains, «whites» in relation to «blacks»,

14 Van Krieken (1998: 147-153) identifies among typical dynamics of relations: 1) the status distinctions between established and outsiders are rooted in an uneven balance of power between them. 2) group power differentials generate a polar contrast between group charisma and group stigma and a particular «socio-dynamics of stigmatization». Although both groups may display a similar range of behaviour, the established groups' greater social cohesion and control over flows of communication enables it to organize its public image in terms of its best members, and to construct the identity of the outsiders in terms of its «worst» members. 3) It is difficult for members of the outsider group to resist internalizing the negative characteristics attributed to it by the established. Members of the outsider group «emotionally experience their power inferiority as a sign of human inferiority» and incorporate the stigmatizing judgments of the established group into their own personality structure. 4) A «we» identity based on a shared history by the established group is a crucial element in the power relationship with the outsiders- role of gossip. 5) Established present themselves as more «civilized» and outsiders as more «barbaric».

15 «The social stigma that its members attach to the outsider group transforms itself in their imagination into a material stigma – it is reified. It appears as something objective, something implanted upon the outsiders by nature or the gods. In that way the stigmatizing group is exculpated from any blame: it is not *we*, such a fantasy implies, who have put a stigma on these people, but the powers that made the world - they have put the sign on these people to mark them off as inferior or bad people. The reference to a different skin colour and other innate or biological characteristics of groups which are, or have been, treated as inferior by an established group has the same objectifying function in this relationship as reference to the imaginary blue stigma of the Burakumin. The physical sign serves as a tangible symbol of the assumed anomie of the other group, of its lower worth in human terms, of its intrinsic badness; like the blue-stigma fantasy, the reference to such «objective» signs has a function in defense of the existing distribution of power chances as well as an exculpatory function» (Elias 1994: xxxiv).

Gentiles in relation to Jews, Protestants in relation to Catholics and vice versa, men in relation to women (in former days), large and powerful nation states in relation to others which are small and relatively powerless, or, as in the case of Winston Parva, an old-established working-class group in relation to members of a new working-class settlement in their neighborhood – in all these cases the more powerful groups look upon themselves as the «better» people, as endowed with a kind of group charisma, with a specific virtue shared by all its members and lacked by the others. What is more, in all these cases the «superior» people may make the less powerful people themselves feel that they lack virtue – that they are inferior in human terms. (Elias 1994: xv-xvi).

As is well-known, the starting point of this research is represented by the fact that residents belonging to some local families considered themselves better human beings compared to those who lived in the more recent part of the community, and the newcomers themselves appeared to accept the fact that they belonged to a less-respected group. Although similar in social composition and employment structure, the inhabitants treated the others as pariahs and often talked about them in terms of great disapproval. How is all this possible? How does the creation and reproduction of mechanisms make it possible and acceptable?

Our author manages to create a veritable theory of social segregation on the basis of information gathered, and testimonies from Winston Parva inhabitants' daily lives. His research involves reconstructing networks of neighborhood relations, observing who spoke with whom, with whom people went to the cinema and to watch what, which were the youth groups, the allowed and not allowed love affairs, association activities and local policies, the reconstruction of those who held significant positions in public life community, the family networks. From all this there emerges an exquisitely sociological dynamic. It is the social relations, the length of residence in the place, with everything that this implies in terms of belonging and sharing<sup>16</sup>, which determine the separation between insiders and outsiders. In this particular figuration of established/outsiders, power is acquired through social cohesion, by having a shared and consolidated network of relationships, shared patterns of living and the pride and principles arising from such sharing. The perception that this may be threatened by outsiders means that the insiders seek to maintain the boundaries between the two different groups through the strengthening of specific traits, emphasizing the good qualities of one group - group charisma - and the lesser qualities of the other - group disgrace. The insiders cut themselves off from outsiders, and stigmatize them as persons with inferior traits, and treat them as people deprived of superior human qualities – i.e. the charisma that distinguishes their own group, and which is attributed only to those in the dominant group.

To preserve what they felt to be of high value, they closed ranks against the newcomers, thus protecting their identity as a group and asserting its superiority. The situation is familiar. It shows very clearly the complementarity of the superior human worth – the group charisma – attributed by the established to themselves and the bad outsiders<sup>17</sup> (Elias 1994: xxii).

While group charisma thus represents an element of power for the dominant group, which uses it to claim such superiority over others, it also comes at a certain cost to the members of the dominant group. «Participation in a group's superiority and its unique group charisma is, as it were, the reward for submitting to group-specific norms» (Elias 1994, p. xxiii). The closing of ranks also serves to avoid possible «contamination» deriving from close contact with members of the outsider groups. «That has all the emotional characteristics of what has been called the «fear of pollution» (Elias 1994, p. xxiv). Any contact with those who are considered «anomics» would

16 «The two groups [...] were not different with regard to their social class, their nationality, their ethnic or racial descent, their religious denomination or their educational level. The principal difference between the two groups was precisely this: that one was a group of old residents established in the neighbourhood for two or three generations and the other was a group of newcomers. The sociological significance of this fact was a marked difference in the cohesion of the two groups. One was closely integrated and the other was not» (Elias 1994, p. xxi-xxii).

17 Here we find what Elias defines as «pars pro toto distortion»: «an established group tends to attribute to its outsider group as a whole the 'bad' characteristics of that group's worst section – of its anomic minority. In contrast, the self-image of the established group tends to be modeled on its exemplary, most 'nomic' or norm-setting section, on the minority of its 'best' members» (Elias 1994: xx)

threaten a member of the established group with «anomic infection».

Hence contact with the outsiders threatens an «insider» with the lowering of his/her status within the established group. He or she might lose its members' regard – might no longer seem to share the higher human value attributed to themselves by the established (Elias 1994, p. xxiv).

Among the tools used for this purpose, the role given to gossip is significant, through which the roles of different actors are defined and significance is given to the values and behavior (actual or alleged) of the stigmatized group.<sup>18</sup> Gossip can be of two types: approval or disapproval. Often we tend to think to this form of communication as a marginal phenomenon, without significant social consequences. However, Elias argues that:

phenomena similar in structure and function to this types of “gossip” can be found on other social levels apart from those of neighborhoods and communities, for instance as stereotypes of collective self-praise and collective abuse of castes or classes on a national [level], or of nations on an international level. One may not immediately recognize their affinity to forms of gossip in a small community. But the difference is more one of degree than one of kind.

### *Final observations*

We have seen how the re-visiting of Weber's concept of charisma begins with Elias's attempt to understand the particular dynamics of exclusion observed in Winston Parva

What Max Weber observed when he studied the Indian caste system with its firmly established charismatic groups, especially the priestly castes, on the one hand, and its various outsider groups, with the pariahs at the bottom, on the other hand, appeared in the light of this small-scale enquiry as an extreme form of a type of relationship which - with varying degrees of complexity and exclusivity - can be found in many societies besides old India. The fact that one came across a variant of it even in a small European community made it seem worthwhile to re-examine Max Weber's concept of group charisma in the light of the additional evidence. (Elias 2009: 74)

This re-visiting focuses on those elements that make this concept a heuristically useful sociological tool. In this concluding section I would like briefly to recall them. As you will recall, we started with the criticism made by Elias of the pre-social-religious magic components that run through Weber's definition, and which give the concept some ambiguity, limiting its usefulness for sociological analysis. Such criticism does not stem from any denial of the emotional components that the concept evokes, and even less from a belief that they should be excluded from scientific analysis. On the contrary, Elias gives sociological citizenship to the emotional sphere, to feelings that move and sustain the actions of human beings in their figuration game. However,

the ideal of rationality in the conduct of human affairs still bars access to the structure and dynamics of established-outsider figurations and to the magnifying group fantasies thrown up them, which are social data sui generis, neither rational nor irrational. At present group fantasies still slip through our conceptual net. They appear as protean historical phantoms that seem to come and go arbitrarily. At the present stage of knowledge one has got so far as to see that affective experiences and fantasies of individual people are not arbitrary – that they have a structure and dynamics of their own. One has learned to see that such experiences and fantasies of a person at an earlier stage of life can influence profoundly the patterning of affects and conduct at later stages. But one has yet to work out a testable theoretical framework for the ordering of observations about group fantasies in connection with the development of groups. (Elias 1994: XXXVI)

Knowledge develops according to the weight that those experiences acquire if they are made in the first stage of life, childhood, influencing development at subsequent stages. «But one has yet to work out a testable

<sup>18</sup> Like charisma cannot be understood if observed just as an individual phenomenon, also stigmatization doesn't concern just the individual. It is connected to the fact how individuals show a deep aversion to other people and how this is related to the formation of a real «prejudice». However it is interesting to analyze the relationship between group stigmatization and individual prejudice, unveiling how the uneven power balance and the relative tensions within figurations is central in the process of stigmatization.

theoretical framework for the ordering of observations about group fantasies in connection with the development of groups» (ibid.). In other words, we must ensure that sociology takes possession of issues left to the exclusive realm of other disciplines, in particular psychology. We must overcome the dualism that sees the individual set against society, and psychology set against sociology. In this reconstruction, we have seen on the one side a kind of «trivialization» of charisma - both in the sense that it is finally released from the aura of mysticism which characterized it for a long time, and also in the sense that it has become attributable in part to ordinary people solely because they belong to certain social groups. But on the other side, we have seen that the effects of group charisma are anything other than banal.

And it is the reminder of the relational components of social life that can show the full extent of the effects of acquisition and maintenance of a position within a group endowed with charisma. Elias transforms group charisma and disgrace into heuristic categories which can be applied to a broad range of sociological analysis, particularly regarding the interpretation of the relational dynamics between individuals and groups, of the production and re-production of social inequalities.

They are categories which must be understood by observing their mutual influence, their links and inter-penetration. The criticism of Weber's category of charisma, therefore, is far from being a call for the abandonment of this concept for the sociological discipline, but is rather presented as an opportunity to re-launch, and in a certain sense, strengthen it.

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