

Book reviews

Norbert Elias, *Essay III. On Sociology and the Humanities. Vol. 16 of The Collected Work of Norbert Elias*, edited by Richard Kilminster and Stephen Mennell. Dublin: UCD Press, 2009, 312 pp.

doi: 10.2383/34633

Norbert Elias's work has long been overshadowed in its value as sociological theory by readings that focused on the most superficial and methodologically showy aspects of his most important research, *The Civilizing Process*.

To give just one example, Berthelot writes at the conclusion of his *The construction of sociology*: "What didn't I talk about in this book? [...] I left out Edward Wilson's socio-biology (1929 -) and the historical sociology which has boosted Norbert Elias's work (1897-1990) [...] As for historical sociology (in some ways a reaction to the "anti-historicist anathemas" of structuralism and Popper's epistemology) I do not think it harms the dignity of sociology, and even of history, to say that this is history, albeit with broader concepts than usual, but still history "[Berthelot 2005, 117]. It seems that Elias cannot get rid of a constant refrain: too sociologist for historians and too historian for sociologists. Yet if this volume – the sixteenth of the collected works being published by the Norbert Elias Foundation at UCD Press – has a main theme, it is that of sociology's field and its epistemological and methodological status. And (as the subtitle chosen by the editors suggests) its relation to the humanities. The 28 essays contained in the volume (at least half of them published in English for the first time and others practically unknown), cover very different issues. They were mostly written in the most fertile period of the author's publishing activity – that following his retirement – although there are also some older texts, reflecting among other things, the constant threads that accompany questions of his prolific and long-lasting cognitive science. Like previous volumes in the series, this one has been very carefully edited and annotated to improve the readability of the texts.

Since the issues covered are apparently unrelated, at first glance they may seem an eccentric collection of interests having little to do with each other. Yet if we look at them carefully, we realize that in reality the whole of Elias's book is focused on same basic questions: What is sociology? What does it deal with, and how? The answers to these questions Elias gives in this volume are many and structured, and in my opinion they are due to three main lines clearly visible throughout the Eliasian sociology.

1. The first one is mostly directed to criticism of how sociology has developed and established as a separate discipline. As the editors write, "Elias was a trenchant critic of many trends in sociology in the second half of the twentieth century, and put forward a very distinctive vision of the character and importance of the discipline. Its perspective needed to be developmental, and it had to be conducted in a spirit of openness and awareness of research in many of its cognate disciplines" [p. X].

Some essays focus specifically on this theme, although traces of it are also elsewhere: *On the? Sociogenesis of sociology* [pp. 43-69]; *Sociology in Danger: the case for the re-orientation of a discipline* [pp. 93-98]; *A diagnosis of present-day sociology*, [pp. 99-106]; *The retreat of sociologists into the present*, [pp.107-126]. To these we would also add those contributions specifically focusing on the relationship with some cognate

disciplines: *Towards a theory of social process; Sociology and psychiatry; On human Beings and their emotions: a process-sociological essay*. Elias argues against an artificial dichotomy of human life “The division of science into natural sciences and others not concerned with nature reveals itself as a symbolic manifestation of an ontological belief in a factually existing division of the world. By and large it is a hidden belief rarely mentioned in scientific discussions or subjected to scientific scrutiny, thus escaping the need to justify itself. This type of human science usually takes the image of a dual world for granted. What are in fact different but wholly inseparable aspects of human beings are thus treated – if they become objects of scientific research – as if they existed in isolation from each other” [p. 142].

Elias goes on to criticize the excessive specialization that had overtaken even sociology, losing sight of its overall object of analysis, society as a whole. But also attempts to set up a central theory that neglected the dynamic and relational elements of social life. This refers in particular and for other reasons to Parsons’s functionalism and to the legacy of Marxist thinking, as well as to structuralist and action theories in general. Elias also criticizes excessive attachment to specific political stances [p.102]. Another danger, according to Elias, lies in the philosophizing drift of some sociological streams [see *Sociology in danger*, pp. 93-98 and *The concept of everyday-life*, pp. 127-134].

Elias also devotes attention to the figure of the sociologist, in his/her particular swinging between involvement and detachment, and the transformations in what a sociologist is due to changes in training. Early generations of sociologists, including himself, came to sociology from related disciplines [“The gradual professionalization of sociology is based on the theories of people who were not professional sociologists,” p. 100] and for this reason were open to other disciplines. Whereas today’s sociology is more professionalized: “The advantages are greater confidence, a more exact knowledge of where one is going, a canonisation of sociological procedure. The disadvantages might be a certain narrowing of view, a routinisation of method and a restriction of imagination, a fear of innovation” [p. 100]. In the professionalization of the discipline also lies what he defines as “The retreat of sociologists into the present” [pp. 108-126], that is, the abandonment of the historical, processual dimension and the subsequent adoption of static categories. This, Elias argues, removes sociology from empirically observable reality, which is characterized precisely by its dynamic nature and its historical and geographical variability.

2. The second set of themes in this volume concern the analytical categories Elias sees as appropriate for this idea of sociology as a science able to analyse this dynamic and historically variable, empirically observable reality: the overcoming of reifying concepts, the abandonment of the classical dichotomies and the acquisition of new dynamic analytical tools. Among these we should mention those which are central in the whole Eliasian opus and which are found in this volume in certain attempts at methodological and conceptual systematization. Firstly, the category of social “figuration” [pp.1-3]. The figuration is presented as an interconnection of actions taken by a group of interdependent human beings. Actors perform actions within socially and biologically fixed limits. In this way, we assist to the re-composition of the “nature”/society dichotomy, as is also pointed out in his essay “On human Beings and their emotions: a process-sociological essay” [pp. 141-158]. In figurations, it is concrete people (with their biologic-

al, cultural, social, psychological characteristics and their paths and aspirations) – and not the abstractly conceived individual – who act within more or less formalized rules, interpreting and helping to reinforce or change [see *The concept of everyday-life*, pp. 127-134 and *The story of the shoelaces: a sociologist on his travels*, pp. 135-137]. In Elias' thought, daily life is the main source for the sociologist, who sees concrete individuals at work – with their we- and I-identity, their habitus – acting and reacting in networks of interdependencies, contributing to create those social institutions, norms and values upon which these actions are performed, and slowly helping to form the various societies that historically (and geographically) people have formed, with their power differentials, their stratification system, their beliefs, their practices, their habits, their bureaucratic structures, their environments, their horizons, their survival units. In Elias' thought, each individual pursues his/her own ends and thereby inevitably acts within boundaries that are given by the historical, geographical and social conditions into which one was born – from the (group and individual) past that inevitably accompanies him/her and towards which he/she is oriented. These boundaries and constraints are not something external to individuals. Through the habitus we have an example of how society becomes part of the individual, contributes to form him/her, a growing individual always subjected to change and transformation throughout the course of his/her existence. The individual defined in this sense acts and reacts according to his/her own purposes, related to his/her concrete daily experience and his/her plans. From these actions and plans, from their interconnections, derive the more general and unplanned trend that one can call “history” [see *Towards a Theory of social processes*, pp. 9-39]. In the determination of individual goals the idea of the quest for survival [and the related *Social anxieties*, pp. 138-140] is central. It is actually in response to the different needs for survival that historically people have given life to changing “survival units,” meaning by this expression all forms of social union among individuals (families, tribes, states, etc...). Through this constant interweaving of actions and reactions we contribute to create new survival units to which we belong, or – to put the same idea in different words – we contribute to give life to society in its various expressions [*African art*, pp. 201-208; *Stages of African art, social and visual*, pp. 209-232; *Foreword to 'The Sociology of Sport'*, pp. 187-189; *Football in the process of civilization*, pp. 190-197; *Pigeon racing*, pp. 198-200]. However, the game is not unidirectional. Elias is always aware that the individual acts within boundaries that are socially, historically and geographically connoted, which the individual must necessarily take into account. Boundaries that may be perceived more as hetero-directed or as self-directed, depending on the stage of civilization reached by the society in which one lives, and which are in any case not passively subjected to, but interpreted by each person.

Closely related to the category of social figuration, Elias proposes that of social process. In Elias' work, a processual logic – applied to the observation of real life, of how real people act and interact – makes it possible (among other things), to link up historical time, biographical time and daily time, between individual biographies and long-term transformations in which these same biographies are moving and in turn producing more general transformations.

As already mentioned, human beings, who form the various figurations, are always situated in time and space. Their characteristics are continuously changing. Through a

process of more general social transformation (which Elias traces back to the general process of civilization) the individual (to use the conventional, modern term for persons), is making his/her way. That is, he/she is also an individual who changes the course of his/her existence. In this sense, therefore, for Elias, the process of individualization is also a process of socialization, or rather, a subject who is empowered by a process of "individualization." It is a unique way to carry out the process of identity construction, always in reference to his/her relations with others.

In the social sciences, those aspects connected with experience – the psychological aspects, feelings, desires, ways of thinking – are also important. To think in processual terms allows us to highlight the interconnections among all these planes showing the difference between the (irreversible) process of biological evolution and social development (i.e., history), which is in contrast reversible (for knowledge can be forgotten).

3. The third set of themes in the book is the centrality of the power dimension in a logic of relationships and interdependence inevitably characterized by the presence of conflicting elements in the reading of figurational processuality. The problem of power is for Elias one of the central problems of sociological work. And the power differential is what explains the pattern of interdependences between human beings. Power differentials are essential to understand the different directions in which particular social interdependencies develop: the relations between academic disciplines [*Sociology and psychiatry*, pp.159-179], the development of professions [*Professions*, pp. 238-239], changes in gender relationships [*The changing balance of power between the sexes*, pp. 240-265]. The more chances of mutual power are distributed among a larger number of people, the harder it is for each person to control the figuration as a whole, and predict the consequences of their and others' actions. In this regard, in a continuous intertwining between psychogenesis and sociogenesis, it is worth mentioning what has been called "psycholonization." This is related to the idea that the more networks of interdependence include larger numbers of people, the more relationships within them become impenetrable and complex. In other words, people have to pay attention to more people in a wider range of circumstances. This leads us to consider more carefully the consequences of our own actions for those who are (in one way or another) linked to us in a relationship of interdependency. And this increases the momentum of "mutual identification." The fact that power is a relational concept also implies that there is mutual recognition of power differentials between those who are involved in the figuration. Those who are in a position of relatively greater power have their power reinforced by the recognition that others give them. This is evident in the group charisma/group disgrace dynamic that divides many groups [see *Group charisma and group disgrace*, pp. 73-81 and Appendix II *Max Weber, involvement, detachment and charismatic leadership*, pp. 280-81]. In Elias' work charisma, together with its corollary, disgrace, – become heuristic categories applicable to a wide range of sociological phenomena, particularly in the reading of relational dynamics between individuals and groups. Categories – group charisma and group disgrace – whose understanding must proceed through observation of their mutual influence, of their bond and their interpenetration. This seems to be an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the emotional elements of actions and relations, when studying the interdependences among human beings for the study of social phenomena.

References

Berthelot, J.M.
2005 *La construction de la sociologie*. Paris: PUF.

Angela Perulli
University of Firenze