EDITORIAL: BEYOND ELIAS

It is far from the intention of the Norbert Elias Foundation, in initiating this twice-yearly newsletter, to foster a cult of the dead. In his lifetime, Elias was often accused of wanting to attract "disciples" and to form a "theoretical school" in sociology. He always denied it. For he was at once both less ambitious and more ambitious than the charge suggests.

Less, because he had no wish to lay down a fixed set of doctrines of the type, often based on some philosophical or political stance, which underlies so many "perspectives" in sociology. He wanted rather to encourage people to pursue further research some of the problems of human life together to which he had drawn attention. In this modest ambition of initiating a research tradition he had some belated success. Younger researchers in many countries and most of the social sciences - anthropology, history, political science and social psychology, as well as sociology - have taken up ideas from Elias, criticised, tested, extended and modified them. We shall be reporting some of their work in this and future issues of this newsletter.

On the other hand, Elias also had a far greater ambition. He believed he had diagnosed many of the flaws which beset the social sciences throughout his long lifetime, and he wanted his insights to find acceptance among social scientists in general. To establish a mere "school" would not assist, and would very likely frustrate, the attainment of that objective.

Elias's dissatisfaction with what he called the "lamentable" state of contemporary sociology - especially because of sociologists' "retreat into the present", their abandonment of the big questions about human society, and the fragmentation of the human sciences - is now widely shared. Several distinguished American sociologists - Peter Berger, Irving Louis Horowitz, Andrew Abbott and Immanuel Wallerstein - have recently expressed similar sentiments. Indeed Wallerstein has announced an international commission, sponsored by the Gutenkian Foundation, with the ambitious goal of "restructuring the social sciences".

Not all was gloom and tears in Elias's lifetime. True, during the middle decades of his life, most sociologists were indifferent to the issues that most concerned him - which might be succinctly described as the connections between power, behaviour, emotions and knowledge in long-term perspective. But even before he died there were strong signs of these once more becoming central questions for social scientists. One only has to mention the acclamations accorded the works of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. It is touching to learn that, in the last years of his life, Foucault, for his own pleasure and private use, translated Elias's The Loneliness of the Dying into French. And Bourdieu, in his tribute on Elias's 90th birthday in 1987, in effect retrospectively claimed Elias as one of his own intellectual forebears. If these are striking instances of the meeting of great minds, they are only the tip of a sizeable iceberg that has floated the interconnections through time of power, behaviour and knowledge back into the centre of social scientists' concerns.

This newsletter will therefore have several purposes. For those who, in various countries, are using Elias's ideas in their own research, we shall serve as a notice board keeping them abreast of each other's work. But our broader objective is to serve as one channel for the wider intellectual stream which is flowing, if not actually under Elias's influence, then at least in the same direction.

Stephen Mennell

THE NORBERT ELIAS FOUNDATION

The Norbert Elias Foundation was established on the initiative of Norbert Elias himself on 14 January, 1983. At his wish, the members of the Board of Trustees were Johan Gouwblom, Hermann Korte and Abram van Stolk.

During the last years of Elias's life, the Foundation organised and sponsored several activities. Two occasions stand out in particular. In June 1984, a conference was organised at the Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung at Bielefeld, on "Civilisation and Theories of Civilising Processes: Comparative Perspectives". Among the participants, besides Elias himself, were Keith Hopkins, William McNeill, and Immans Westerbeek. In June 1987, Elias's 90th birthday was the occasion for a conference on "Process and Progress" at Apeldoorn in the Netherlands; here it was mainly members of a younger generation who were given the opportunity to present papers and enter into discussion with Elias. This conference was followed by a festive meeting in the University of Amsterdam with speeches by Pierre Bourdieu, Maarten Brands, Siegfried Unseld and Bryan Wilson.

When Elias died on 1 August 1990, the Foundation was his sole legatee. The first duty of the trustees was to organise its cremation and, a few months later, a memorial meeting which was held in Amsterdam on 2 November. Since then it has managed to obtain a grant from the Thyssen-Stichting for making a complete inventory of Elias's papers and possessions. This time-consuming task was performed by Rudolf Knijff and Saskia Visser, who completed their work in February 1994. It was then decided that all Elias's papers, including manuscripts and letters, would be transferred to the Schiller Literaturarchiv in Marbach, Germany.

Another initiative was the establishment of a Norbert Elias Chair in the Sociology of Long-Term Processes at the University of Utrecht. The first incumbent of this chair, Nico Wilkenlink, delivered his inaugural lecture on 8 September 1993, on "Inequality and Innovation: Developments in Property Relations".

The Board has not been successful in all its activities. It tried to raise funds for maintaining the apartment in Amsterdam in which Elias spent the last years of his life. In spite of the support of an illustrious committee of diplomats, politicians, scholars, and writers, these attempts failed to yield the financial resources needed to establish a Norbert Elias House.

From 1 April, 1994, the Foundation moved to a smaller office at Vottinkstraat 13, Amsterdam. The office will continue to be run jointly by Rudolf Knijff and by Saskia Visser, who will act as Executive Secretary. In the immediate future, the Board sees in its main activities as being: (1) a continued concern for the publicisation of Elias's writings, including the selection and editing of posthumous work; the preparation of a standard edition of collected works, and the promotion of translations; and (2) the organisation of conferences where Elias's work will be discussed and continued. A third, more general, objective is furthering by all conceivable means "figurational" or "process sociology" as it was developed by Elias. The Newsletter fits very well into this objective.

Johan Goudsbloem

"Further details of the services provided by the Marbach archive will be given in the next issue of Figurations towards the end of 1994.

NORBERT ELIAS AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Paris, 7-8 April 1994

Bernard Lacroix and Alain Garigu in the Groupe d’analyse politique, DÉA de Sociologie politique at the Université de Paris X Nanterre, organised what is thought to be the first conference in France devoted solely to exploring the significance of Elias's work for contemporary social science. It was held at the dynamic new Institut International de Paris La Défense, in the heart of La Défense, not far from the Grande Arche. Around 100 people attended, and the figure might have been higher, had the first day not coincided with a public transport strike in Paris!

The papers presented are to be published later, but we list them here briefly and in English translation, session by session:

1. ELIAS THE MAN AND POLITICS

Bérand Lacroix (Nanterre): Norbert Elias, Politics and History

Catherine Collin-Thélaine (ENS): The Concept of Rationalization: From Max Weber to Norbert Elias

Phillipe Chaliès (Nanterre): Aspects of the Sociology of Norbert Elias’s Political Thought

Jacqueline Bancel (St-Germain): Links and Regularities in the "cultural invariants" according to Nietzsche, Weber and Elias

Alain Garigu (Nanterre): Science, Ludens, Norbert Elias, Games and Society

2. NATIONAL HABITS AND STATE-FORMATION


Monceur Djadi (Louvain-la-Neuve): Norbert Elias’ Contribution to the Analysis of State-Formation

Gérard Noél (ENS): National Habits

Guimôme Denis (Dijon): Norbert Elias and International Relations

3. MANNERS AND CIVILISING PROCESSES

Stephen Metzull (Dallas): The Other Side of the Coin: Decivilizing Processes

Guillaume Court (Nanterre): Psychic Economy and the Formation of Social Groups

Claudine Haroche and Anna Montoya (Amiens): Psychic Economy and Political System: Norbert Elias’s Historical Psychology

Oualès Henry (Nanterre): From Servant-Maids to Pro-Arists: Towards a Theory of Individualisation

4. WORKING WITH ELIAS

Johan Goudsbloem (Amsterdam): Working with Norbert Elias

Inser No 1 June 1994
Now at last a one-volume edition of The Civilising Process has been published (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994; xvii + 558 pp; ISBN 0-631-19221-2 (ib), 0-631-10122-X (pb)). This should certainly help to make Elias's mammoth opus better understood in the anglophone world. It is a great pity that, even though the text has been completely reset for this edition, the publishers have failed to make any corrections to the original English edition. They have even carried over the original contents page, with its numerous errors and omissions, despite having been supplied with lists of corrections. One is tempted to remark, "Oh, well, publishers are like that", but that might be considered unfair and ungrateful.

Three other books by Elias will also shortly be published in English. Refections on a Lifetime and The German: Studies of Power-Struggles and the Development of Hobbits in the 17th and 20th Centuries will both soon be issued by Polity Press. (Eric Dunning and Stephen Mentzel are still in the throes of revising the translation of the latter.) Sage are republishing The Embellished and the Unembellished, complete with the long introductory essay that Elias later wrote for the Dutch edition and which has never appeared in English.

Judging from citation indices, although many American social scientists evoked the first volume, scarcely any of them read the second half of the book. By the 1980s, many were interested in state formation processes, but the American title led them away from that important part of Elias's theory; and although the expression "civilising" crops up in American sociology, as a static concept it wholly fails to capture the character of Elias's prosocial thinking. Above all, unless the two volumes are read as one book, one cannot grasp the crucial links Elia's traces between power and behaviour, between the "macro" and the "micro" levels of development.

Some Recent Books and Theses


This study deals with religion and politics in Peru from the beginning of agrarianisation until 1991. Of central importance for the analysis are state formation and development, the relations between church and state, the internal and external relations within and among the various religious groupings. These national themes are illustrated at a local level by the examination of the history of an Andean village, situated near Cusco. The general part of the book is based on archaeological, historical and social anthropological data and includes case studies of village churches and church documents and books in archives in Peru and Spain. In addition the author did field research in the village. This very long-term investigation is among the first of its kind. It is also an exploration of the concept "religio regime" as an analytical tool.


This book circumscribes educational expansion as the unintended result of a progressive figural constraint people have come to exert on each other and themselves. From the sixteenth century onwards, political elites have sought to expand the supply of education in order to unify (aan nation, strengthen their internal position, discipline the lower classes, and bring about economic modernization. The transformation of these ends was stimulated by the symbiotic of the ruling elites of the emergent states in North-west Europe with Protestantism, and the entrepreneurship of educational professionals and progressive factions of the bourgeoisie. When elementary schooling surpassed a threshold, the Industrial Revolution transformed production relations, and anonymous labour emerged, employers started treating educational credentials as-covering devices, thereby stimulating school attendance. By the end of the nineteenth century, rising standards of living enabled the lower classes to aspire to education. The higher classes responded to this threat by attending secondary schools, colleges and universities. Education became the cen-
eral area of class struggle. In the twentieth century, educational expansion became both demand-driven and self-propelling. Compulsory education has developed into a schooling system. Like health care and social security, education has reached social limits to growth. Fierce state competition with the education system has cost: a chronic fear of failure. Also, education serves as a lightning rod for existential uncertainties and political problems, creating an educational system for those who do not want to work, who play the game, who are greedy, selfish and non-communicative individuals, is a mythical abstraction.


This study of the fight against venere- al disease in the Netherlands from 1820 to the very recent past reviews the various efforts to control venereal disease and discusses the changing ideas underpinning these efforts in their economic, social and political contexts. The discussion is drawn between narrators and personages in the venereal disease debate. Narrators speak or write on venereal disease, set forth their views and in their solutions. In their treatments they present characters to illustrate their views, the persons held more or less responsible for the spread of venereal disease. It is shown that fluctua- tions in the virulence of the vene- real disease debate cannot be satisfac- tionedly explained by the objective danger of venereal disease or by fluctua- tions in its prevalence. A more fruitful explanation lies in the distinction between narrators and personages. Relations between these two cate- gories, though constantly changing, turned out to be comprehensible in terms of three kinds of wider power relations: between social classes, be- tween men and women, and between doctors and patients. It was primarily from changes in these relations that the venereal disease debate derived its dynamics. In retrospect, the debate ex- hibits some striking developments. They concern the way the venereal dis- ease debate implicated the control of sexual behavior. Here a growing con- fidence in self-control came to the fore as external control was replaced by individual responsibility and com- pulsory measures were replaced by voluntary behavioural changes.


The author pursues a dual objective. He illustrates a number of hitherto and pul- zing aspects of the history of Jews in Eu- rope by using a figurational or process- sociological approach. And, taking note of Norbert Elias's own German-Jewish descent, he sheds light on the roots and general character of the sociological synthesis to which he contrib- utes. Russell clarifies and highlights in novel ways such things as: the distinctive financial role played by Jews in medieval European states; the process of gentiliza- tion that occurred from the 16th century onwards; the role of the "Court Jews" in the era of absolutism; the problem of Je- wish emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries; and the problems of assimila- tion faced by Jews in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. Problems which were exacerbared by the immigration of Jews from the East (Ostjuden).

CONTRIBUTIONS

The latest issue of Figurarijsch en zal te maken in early December 1994. News and views should be sent to the Editor, Sophie Meetink, in Drif- lar, by 1 November.

Auteur Theo has agreed to act as Co-organis- ing Editor for Germany, Helmut Knittker for Austria, Kalle Verrips for The Netherlands, Yo- urufo for Europe (except the countries to be covered by our own coverage).

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