

Figurations

Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation

■ ABRAM DE SWAAN: WISDOM THROUGH HINDSIGHT

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

Speech on retirement as University Professor in the University of Amsterdam
26 January 2007.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends,

About fifty years ago, not far from here, I was sitting at my desk at home, not doing my homework, and something occurred to me: in a dictatorship, people want to rebel, but nobody wants to be the only one. They need to be certain that everyone else will rise up with them. That way, each person only takes a small risk. United, they cannot be defeated, so the dictatorship will fall. What they need is some kind of code which everyone knows is the signal for the uprising, and that everyone will hear at the same time. That signal, I decided, should be the letter 'Q'. It sounds like 'cue'. The cue for rebellion.

I still think it is a valid idea. It is an initial version of the notorious problem of coordination. With a ready-made solution. That was, therefore, the moment I took up social science. Not that I knew at the time. Nobody knew. So I got on with my homework. With the radio blaring, because iPods had not been invented yet.

I took my finals in a paroxysm of precocious erudition, and went off to study political science at the University of Amsterdam. Apart from Hans Daudt



and Lucas van der Land (a personal friend of my parents), all the professors were specialists in very different fields, and they all thought their own subject was far more important than the other ones. Everything else was just a makeweight. So in effect you got six courses for one fee. Back then, I thought this was a great privilege. And I still do. I also took a semester of mathematics, and read Plato's *Dialogues*. Because what I really wanted was to know everything.

At seven, everyone has that insatiable thirst for knowledge, and hardly anyone still has it at seventeen. And my thirst also calmed down eventually – I think it was when I became an editor of *Propria Cures*.¹ There, rather than having to read about everything, you could write about everything. So I wrote three hundred articles in two years. I was a galley slave, but it felt like freedom. And of course it was.

What remains is not the compulsive need to know everything, but the freedom to know anything. To me, that is still what the University is all about: you can ask whatever you want, and know whatever you want. Almost.

This farewell speech is also the final speech on the conference on *Mobility* organised by the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, my academic home, to mark their twentieth anniversary together with their academic friends at home and abroad.

¹ *Propria Cures* ('Mind your own Business') is the weekly University of Amsterdam student newspaper, first published in 1890.

I do not want to focus on transnational mobility, movement across geographical frontiers, oceans and continents. I want to talk about transdisciplinary mobility: intellectual movement beyond the frontiers between subject areas and the borders separating disciplines. And I did move around a lot. Not that I view that as an achievement. It was due to impatience and curiosity. But there is more continuity to it than meets the eye, and that is what I want to talk about today.

While turning out my impudent pieces in the student magazine, I was working on a dissertation on coalition theories. I had chanced upon a writer, William H. Riker, who was attempting to describe social reality in mathematical terms. He maintained that politicians did not seek to achieve the greatest possible support. They wanted just enough support to win. Everyone else is superfluous, so why would you let them share in the spoils? Most people, when they encounter this theory, feel that they could have thought it up for themselves. It is so obvious. But almost everyone, even today, also assumes that politicians are after maximum support. That is usually not the case.

I had the privilege of studying in the United States for two years, on a very generous grant from the Harkness Fund. Almost all the professors of my generation underwent this American initiation in late adolescence. With Hans Daudt as my home supervisor, I wrote a dissertation at Yale University on mathematical coalition theories as applied to cabinet formation. I was not even halfway through before I lapsed from the faith. It was a real moment of conversion. Charles Lindblom started it all off in a seminar. He subjected me to questioning on the assumptions of the rational-choice model that underpins all mathematical explanations on the subject. It took him a mere twenty minutes of Socratic dialogue to persuade me that people did not make decisions on the basis of a full overview of their situation. They grope their way in fits and starts, and only when something goes wrong. 'The science of muddling through.'

Released from my faith, I cheerfully continued as before. But I took a two-

pronged approach. In addition to my formal analysis, I also wrote extensive descriptions of European multiparty systems since 1918, and used them to test the formal theories. Combining history with formal analysis was an unusual approach, but I have stuck with it in my later work.

While I was in the United States, I also wrote a weekly radio letter, 'A breathless report from the USA', for the Dutch broadcaster VPRO. This turned into my first book, *America in Installments*.² And I carried on writing pieces for a newspaper, the *NRC*, which were reprinted in book form.³ I was one of the editors of the literary periodical *De Gids* for over twenty years. It never occurred to me that these shorter essays were different from my university work. They just took less time to write and elicited a swifter response. Academics usually have to wait a very long time for the reaction to their published work – if indeed there is one. And this sluggish, meagre response goes some way to explaining the dour academic way of life.

I took my doctorate under Nico Frijda, who recently published yet another great work, *The Laws of Emotion*,⁴ in his fifteenth year of retirement.

My dissertation made me world famous – in a very small world.⁵ But I had had my fill of formal analysis. I wanted to do something completely different, 'something to do with people'. I took psychoanalysis. Nobody does that without some very personal reason. But it was also an intellectual voyage of discovery. Later on, I was trained as a psychoanalyst, I went on to have patients of my own, and was a group co-therapist with Louis Tas.

² *Amerika in termijnen: een ademloos verslag uit de USA* (Amsterdam: Polak & Van Gennep, 1968).

³ *Halverwege de heilstaat: krantenstukken* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1984).

⁴ London: Routledge, 2006.

⁵ *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formations: A Study of Formal Theories of Coalition Formation Applied to Nien European Parliaments after 1918* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1973).

I learned from Huyck van Leeuwen, who proved that psychoanalysis embraced a number of quite unnecessary assumptions. Freud could have managed with a great deal less theorising, and that would have made his opus less vulnerable to criticism. All these set pieces enrich psychoanalysis as a worldview, but there is no need for them.

In the social sciences, psychoanalysis is important as a practical system for ascribing motives. A good analyst always works with limited, local hypotheses. Is the patient perhaps envious of his wife's successes (and unwilling to admit to such childishness)? Or is he still angry because she once flirted with his flatmate? I am giving innocent examples, because that is the way things normally are. And it may be something different every time. And several different things at once. So you listen carefully, you remember previous remarks, and once in a while you ask a question.

To ask the right questions, you first need to know a lot about the other person's world. Psychoanalysis is very like a cryptic crossword: once you have solved the first few clues, you can more or less see how the rest is going to turn out.

Sociologists and anthropologists often work in much the same way as psychoanalysts in the consulting room. But their situation is much less ordered and shielded, and their relationship with their informants is much less defined. These three disciplines could learn a lot from each other. They all seek to decode human motivation. To this end, they all use a set of limited assumptions, which are constantly revised. Psychotherapists talk about *resistance*: the unwillingness to talk about what upsets us, or even to admit it to ourselves. Anthropologists and sociologists look at how people present themselves in a given social context, and how they airbrush out anything that does not fit into the image they wish to portray. If you are looking for an instance of 'presentation of self', this speech is it.

What social scientists often fail to see (even though George Devereux pointed it out forty years ago) is *countertransference* from the researcher to the informant. All kinds of semiconscious

fantasies (such as erotic thoughts) or, much more shameful, feelings of superiority (since researchers are often higher up the social scale than their sources) are dismissed as irrelevant, embarrassing, or inconvenient. As a result, they cannot yield any insights, and distortions cannot be corrected. Sociological and anthropological researchers would benefit from training in the psychoanalytical technique.

When I was writing my dissertation in the United States, with no grant and no job, I earned a living interviewing pop musicians for the German broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk, together with Paul van den Bos. These little films were sold on to countries around the world, and for a while the back of my head must have been one of the most famous on earth. When the Dutch broadcasters VPRO and VARA gave us a chance to make documentaries, we seized it. The last one was about production-line workers and called *And a pat on the back to boot*. The text of the interviews with an introduction appeared as a book. I still know the last sentence by heart: 'But at work human degradation goes on as ever.'

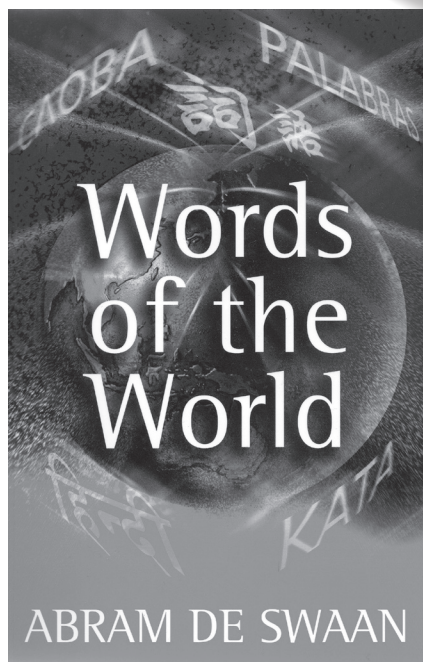
Midway between political science and psychoanalysis stands sociology. So, evidently, I had become a sociologist. Johan Goudsblom was the first to spot the fact, and brought me back to the Amsterdam faculty where I had studied. There he introduced me to Norbert Elias. Literally, because we went to Leicester with Paul van den Bos to make a documentary about him.

The wind in those days blew firmly to the left, with the occasional gust of psyche. It was a period when many people were trying to combine Marx and Freud. This brought some of them to Norbert Elias, who could provide a wide-ranging historical overview of societal development and used it to explain how the modern character had arisen. It was a tortuous introduction to his work but, once inside it, newcomers quickly became fascinated by Elias's own thinking, as presented by Johan Goudsblom in Amsterdam.

In this circle, it suddenly seemed much easier to bring my divergent interests

and activities together: psychoanalysis, history and politics, research, essays and documentaries. Norbert Elias was open to virtually everything. But formal models he despised. I once suggested formalising his figurations of free, bound and monopolistic competition. His reply was curt: 'But what would that add to them?'

Elias's work on the shift from aristocratic competition for status to bourgeois competition for money may be the finest example of a transition from one model to another. He shows that human beings have probably always been competitive, but that the prizes and rules of competition vary according to the historical and social context. That is a central problem for the rational-choice approach (or so it ought to be).



I had the opportunity to conduct research at the Netherlands Cancer Institute, in a team led by the psychiatrist-cum-psychoanalyst Andries van Dantzig, who died only recently. We approached the hospital as a community where everything revolved around cancer and the fear of cancer. And not only among the patients, but among the nurses, the young doctors and perhaps even the experienced specialists as well. This working hypothesis had not been proved and has never been fully confirmed. But it did keep us on the alert for such things as institutional legends

about beginners who were too sensitive to their patients' worries, with disastrous results... 'Don't even go there. The patients' appetite for emotional support is insatiable'.

Van Dantzig described the Cancer Institute as a 'system of hope', where patients were constantly offered the prospect of treatment, thus continually postponing the emotional confrontation with the end of life.

I myself saw the hospital system as an 'economy of attention', where patients demanded attention from the nurses, and junior staff demanded it from their seniors. A request for support could be refused, so instead a claim was made for care or treatment. And that was rarely refused.

Those, at any rate, were our hypotheses. To test them, we planned to discuss the research report with groups of staff and patients. But the report was leaked, the group discussions were cancelled, and the hospital board obtained a court ruling banning the report. That ban has now been in place for nearly thirty years. It is time it was lifted.

Some sociologists and anthropologists take the view that researchers should restrict themselves to what their informants tell them. Personally, I think that a researcher who has experience and expertise, as an outsider, can often see more than the respondents: the motives they do not want to admit to (even to themselves); the interdependencies and power relationships which they do not notice or do not want to see. This amounts to interpretative, even *hineininterpretierende* sociology. Any such insights remain tentative. They are only theories and must be tested against informants' reactions and other, comparable research, and must appear plausible to other experts. This testing process is impossible as long as the book cannot be published.

I had now been appointed to the University of Amsterdam and became increasingly involved in the group of sociologists around Johan Goudsblom, inspired by Norbert Elias's theory of civilising processes. In those days, I frequently worked in a team. Christien

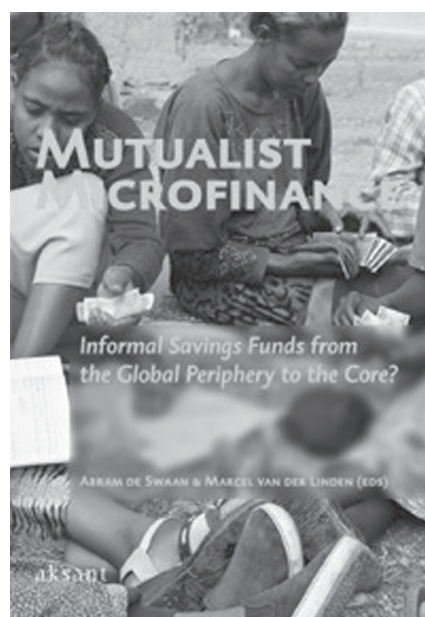
Brinkgreve, Jan Onland and I wrote a study on *The Rise of the Psychoanalytical Trade*, and Regina van Gelderen, Victor Kense and I wrote about *The Initial Interview as a Task*.⁶

I had obviously found my niche: a sociological approach to psychological problems and changes in patterns of interaction.

My inaugural lecture looked at the question that was of great concern to the figuration sociologists around Norbert Elias and Johan Goudsblom at that time: do not the freer forms of behaviour which became normal in the twentieth century run counter to the theory of civilising processes? My argument was that the sociably acceptable range of behaviour had indeed broadened, particularly for women, children and inferiors. But, on the other hand, that range is only acceptable subject to limitations which, in fact, have grown stricter. Firstly, all these variations in behaviour are acceptable only by mutual consent. Secondly, self-aggrandisement with regard to above others, such as women, social inferiors, minorities, handicapped people and the poor is now less acceptable. Thirdly, people must express their desires and stand up for them, but must also be willing to compromise. Fourthly, there are more occasions where they must take more account of people in more respects. People are expected to be more careful of their time, money, property and their own bodies. This development in its entirety might be described as a shift from management by command to management by negotiation. It has been under way for some forty years already.

At the university, the 1970s were a period of anti-establishment protest and of democratisation. The 1980s then saw a succession of administrative reforms. Most of them I have forgotten, and they had little impact on education or research.

⁶ Abram de Swaan et al., *Sociologie van de sociologie*, vol. 1, *De opkomst van het psychotherapeutisch bedrijf*; vol. 2, *Het spreekuur als opgave* (De Meern/Antwerpen: Aula/Het Spectrum, 1979). De Swaan's contributions are reprinted in English in *The Management of Normality: Essays in Health and Welfare* (London: Routledge, 1990).



What was important was the fact that so many more young people were able to come to the university to study.

I became increasingly interested in the development of the welfare state, as did my immediate colleagues in the research team on the Sociology of Care, Rineke van Daalen and Ali de Regt. I decided to write a major sociological work, in English, on the collectivisation of care.

People try to set up collective arrangements to provide protection from deficiency and adversity. It is often the rich and established who take the initiative, because they wish to avert the threat emanating from the ragged, vagrant poor and the contagious sick. But setting up charities, refuges and schools for the poor requires collective action from the established citizenry. If some of the rich do not contribute, they reap all the public-order benefits that care of the poor provides, but bear none of the costs. If the majority follows that line of thought, nothing gets done. That is the dilemma of collective action.

In spite of everything, people do embark on joint enterprises for the common weal. My book *In Care of the State*⁷ explains how these care systems have come into being despite all obstacles. These processes have taken place in Europe and the United States

⁷ *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (London: Routledge, 1988).

in successive steps, on an ever-increasing scale: from the village parish to the city and environs and then on to the national context, where present-day welfare systems operate. *In Care of the State* is a work of comparative historical sociology in both subject matter and approach, and there is an unmistakable connection between the collectivisation process and the civilisation process. However, the core concept of collectivisation also refers to the doctrine of collective goods, which is familiar from welfare economy and n-person game theory. These mostly use static models. I sought to demonstrate that the dilemmas of collective action arise in a transitional phase, where the parties do understand that they are interdependent and that the actions of one have consequences for the welfare of another, but are not yet in a position to coordinate their collective actions effectively. In this transitional phase, the collectivity and its collective goods come into being concurrently and inter-connectedly. That is the collectivisation process. In this way, the concepts are lifted from their static framework and operate as dynamic concepts in a processual approach: a synthesis of the formalising rational-choice approach and the historicising sociological method. Anyone undertaking this type of work will reap approbation and opprobrium from all sides, but the polemic gave me an opportunity to refine my position still further.

In the academic world of the 1980s these two schools of thought increasingly confronted each other. In Amsterdam, a cooperative venture eventually led to the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, which is celebrating its twentieth anniversary today. In Utrecht and Groningen, disciples of the rational-choice paradigm clustered around the ICS. Three theses have been written on how these schools came into being, so I will not dwell on the matter here. What followed was literally a textbook example of habitus-formation within two rival institutions, as they were driven further and further apart in competition for grants and recognition.

In the Amsterdam School, researchers with various backgrounds met and inspired one another. Anthropologists,

political scientists, sociologists and historians came together in a programme of comparative, historical, empirical and integrated social science (in the singular). It was 'antidisciplinary' (to quote Jan Breman) and crossed the dividing line between specialist fields. There I encountered historians such as Piet de Rooij, anthropologists such as Anton Blok, Bonno Thoden van Velsen, Jojada Verrips and Peter Kloos, and fellow-sociologists such as Cees Schuyt, Nico Wilterdink and, of course, Johan Goudsblom. I had always thought that Asian societies were too alien for me to understand, but there I got the chance to travel around India and Africa. 'Alien' peoples thus lost their exotic gloss for me. They remained distant and foreign, but they no longer appeared unfathomable.

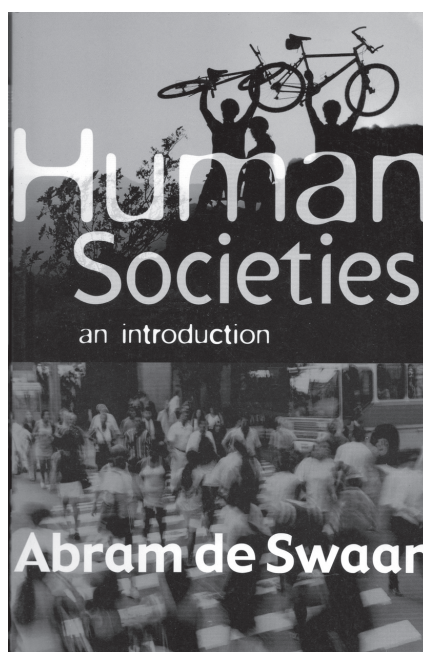
I helped to found the Amsterdam School, and was its academic director for ten years, together with Jan Breman. This was the ideal job for us. Even the administrative work was a sinecure – not least because we could have absolute confidence in Hans Sonneveld as managing director and José Komen as *chef de bureau*.

As Asia specialists, anthropologists, sociologist and political scientists worked together, they grew increasingly interested in the transnational society (which is obviously the largest common denominator for all the disciplines). I had grown into that trend and took an interest in globalisation. By this I mean the process whereby local variety of supply increases everywhere while, at the same time, this increasingly varied supply becomes increasingly similar from place to place. Globalisation, therefore, means local heterogenisation and global homogenisation. If you like formulae, as I do, you will recognise this as the chemical definition of a *homogenous mixture*.

Transnational society may also be seen as the latest phase in a process of scale-enlargement and collectivisation. What is now happening on a global scale is comparable to what used to happen at the local or national level: the threat posed by poor migrants and infectious diseases now crosses oceans and continents. And once again the estab-

lished parties (in global terms: the rich countries) find themselves faced with a problem of coordination, and thus with the dilemmas of collective action. I gave the Den Uyl lecture on transnational social policy, and the Amsterdam School submitted a major research programme on the same subject to the Netherlands Institute for Scientific Research. This won joint first prize in a pandisciplinary national competition and was then voted out by fellow-social scientists on a small advisory committee. Such things would happen often.

In spite of this, the Amsterdam School implemented most of the programme, using other means. I continued working on the transnational society and returned to a theme from *In Care of the State*: the spread of languages, which I took from the national to the global level. The starting principle was a simple



statement of fact: 'the human species is divided into more than five thousand groups each of which speaks a different language and does not understand any of the others'. That is the first sentence of *Words of the World: the Global Language System*.⁸ The fact that humanity has not disintegrated into isolated little groups since the Tower of Babel is due to multilinguals, who maintain the

connections between these groups. These in turn combine to create a strong and efficient system: the global language system.

But why is it that a handful of languages have spread so far around the world, while so many others have been abandoned or are withering away? The reasons have nothing to do with the characteristics of the languages themselves but with the power relationships between the people who speak them, learn them or abandon them.

Expectations of other people's language choices are also of decisive importance. Just as people usually prefer to buy gadgets with the technological standard that they believe most others will choose (HD DVD, blue-ray), they also choose the 'winning language'. This pattern of anticipating other people's expectations can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, a well known phenomenon in social science. Thus there may be a slow-motion stampede towards the option that everyone believes will win or a mass flight away from the option that is perceived to be losing. This is why 90 per cent of European school-children are learning English, and fewer and fewer are interested in French. This happens despite European Union propaganda which tries to seduce them into learning as many different languages as possible: 'life-long learning'. They won't fall for it.

This book also seeks to apply formal concepts from economics and game theory within a dynamic sociological context. The subject matter is new, but the book continues the same methodological thrust. I read a first version of the book out in French when teaching at the Collège de France, where I held the *chaire européenne* for a year at the invitation of Pierre Bourdieu. But the French version was not fit for publication, and on the last page I wrote, 'Oops, wrong language'. Because the global language system demanded a different one.

Today sees the publication of a collection of essays on large-scale violence: *Beacons in No Mans Land*.⁹ I have been

⁸ Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

⁹ *Bakens in niemandsland: Essays over massaal geweld* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007).

working on this theme for some fifteen years. I will not attempt to slot this book into my *oeuvre* here. I have not yet got a broad enough overview. I need comments from other people, from the readers, my colleagues: self-knowledge comes from the people around us.

The time has come. A farewell is a two-edged sword. I am extremely flattered at this conference organised in my honour. On the other hand, I also feel I am being sent away, dismissed for life. At the same time, I know I am now even freer to do what I like best: less of the same thing.

Let us not kid ourselves. I, too, have been sixty-four. And younger. And I have caught myself secretly thinking a triumphant little thought when an older colleague retired: 'That's him gone. One less person above me'. This illicit rejoicing concealed respect for the older person, whom I evidently saw as being above me. So let me say it: Lo and behold! - I have turned sixty-five.

There is a fine tradition that the great honour you have all chosen to do me today should be recompensed with individual words of thanks. Small change. I do not intend to shower you with mere pennies. I will not attempt to wrap up my admiration for so many and varied people in a couple of words. You deserve better than that, and sometime it will come.



For the University of Amsterdam, the 'Social Faculty' and the Amsterdam School, I have very many thanks and very few reproaches. In fact, I have always been allowed to do just as I pleased. I was a free professional with a job for life. I can only hope that the great freedom the university provides will remain. Most researchers are inveterate self-exploiters, and they know best which direction research should go. Give them their head. It is what my successors deserve: Anita Hardon, Marcel van der Linden, John Grin, Jan Willem Duyvendak. And all the others whose time has now come.

At this stage, I am supposed to say, 'My students taught me more than anyone'. But that is not true. Again and again, I was surprised by their ability to think I meant something I did not. From them, therefore, I learned first and foremost to express myself as clearly as possible. I was always meeting clever students, witty students, eccentric students, who wanted to learn and who had new things to say. Every year they come. If the class went well, we came to love each other just a little bit. But that soon passed. Don't get any ideas.

I do not want to get more personal than that. Or perhaps I will: some people move out of your life, but consider this:

there was once a good reason why they came into it. And other people remain in your life. I am delighted to see my sister Carrie, my son Meik and my dear life-companion Cindy here today.

In the twelve years since my mother died, I have come to miss her more and more. My father lived in turbulent times and was himself too unquiet to study, but he was to the core of his being someone with the urge to know. I did not realise it, but he passed that on to me. He has now been dead for fifty years – exactly as long as I have been in social science. I have always felt that I have been doing exactly what he would have wanted to do with his own life. That greatly increased my enjoyment of work and knowledge.

In other words, I have always felt completely at home at the Social Faculty of the University of Amsterdam. And that remains so.

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