



Figurations

Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation

SPECIAL ISSUE, JUNE 2022

THE FANTASY–REALITY CONTINUUM: SCIENCE, RELIGION, POLITICS,
CULTURE

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, 8–10 DECEMBER 2022

The next regular issue of *Figurations* will not appear until late July, and so we are publishing this special issue to draw your attention in good time to the upcoming conference on *The Fantasy–Reality Continuum* in Warsaw, 8–10 December 2022.

The conference will be face-to-face (on-site) in Warsaw with some sessions online.

We are asking participants to submit abstracts of their papers by 15 July. For further details of submission see below.

The topic

Too often, the kind of social research that takes its inspiration from Norbert Elias – relatively detached, and taking a long-term perspective – often seems a little remote from a mainstream sociology preoccupied with the practical problems of present-day society. But not in this case – suddenly the idea of a fantasy–reality continuum has become central to many problems of our age. (See a list of provocative thoughts about this in the Appendix below.)

The idea of the fantasy–reality continuum plays a key part in Norbert Elias’s sociological theory of knowledge and the sciences. The struggle to achieve relatively more ‘reality-congruent’ knowledge has been closely bound up with long-term civilising processes, and notably the gradual reduction of levels of everyday danger and corresponding fears. The

gathering pace of the natural sciences involved breaking religions' historic monopoly over the means of orientation. At the same time, the social organisation of the sciences brought with it relatively strong controls over the scope of fantasy, with the curbs on emotion and fantasy were relatively weaker in the realm of politics, and weaker still in the field of cultural creativity.

All this has suddenly become of great contemporary practical and political relevance. The curbs on the free exercise of fantasy have seemed suddenly to be much weaker, and fears are on the rise. As indeed so have, in politics especially, the curbs on untruthfulness: is it now more possible to 'get away' with consciously telling lies, possibly with the intention of promoting fantastic beliefs for other people? Examples abound that it is less possible than before to take for granted the effectiveness of social controls over standards of evidence and truth in debates, be it over military aggression parading as self-defence or the unfulfillable campaign promises ending in disasters. Even hard scientific expertise has been affected, as witness for example the denial of climate change and the strength of 'anti-vax' fantasies. Softer scholarly contributions to our knowledge about human societies past and present also face severe challenges by revisionists, reformers and revolutionaries. Among those are the pursuers of historical politics and politics of memory marked by *ressentiment*, striving to reverse the arrow of time, and fundamentalists, seeking to establish new utopias in lieu of the old ones such as the human rights.

In all this, the new social media have apparently played a decisive part. At first seen as a possible step towards greater democratisation of knowledge production and dissemination, they also appear to have fostered in some quarters an extreme individualistic belief that 'anything goes'. The Janus nature of an apparently limitless human communication has seldom become so evident.

We hope this topic will stimulate the whole wide range of contributions from scholars of any theoretical and methodological orientation coming from social sciences and humanities, including sociology, economy, history, cultural studies, literary studies, gender studies migration studies, political science, international relations, theology, and law. It is our goal to bring social-scientific understanding of long-term history processes to bear on the shifts in the fantasy–reality continuum in today's world. It is anticipated that the conference will comprise five streams, including, apart from a general one, streams on science, religion, politics, and culture, for which the following list of indicative subjects is suggested as a starting point for contributors' consideration.

Submission of papers

Abstracts of no more than 300 words should be submitted to:
Fantasy-Reality-Warsaw2022@is.uw.edu.pl not later than 31 July 2022.

Abstracts should:

- specify the title of the presentation and the preferred stream;
- give not more than five keywords;
- include details of all institutional affiliations of all the authors (with an indication of their student/PhD student/independent scholar status);
- indicate the preferred mode of participation (on-site or online); it will be possible to change the participation mode until the end of September 2022.

The language of the conference will be English.

The authors of the abstracts will be notified of their acceptance and of the registration fees by mid-July 2022.

Registration for the conference will open on 1 August 2022.

Organising Committee

Under the auspices of the Norbert Elias Foundation, the steering group for the conference consists of Marta Bucholc (University of Warsaw), Valerie Dahl (Universität Münster), Jason Hughes (University of Leicester), Katie Liston (Ulster University) and Stephen Mennell (University College Dublin).

APPENDIX:

SOME PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

Science

- Are science and the democratisation of knowledge incompatible?
- What does ‘anything goes’ mean in the production and reception of scientific knowledge? What are the limitations to the laissez-faire in the field of knowledge production?
- How are we to understand and explain current challenges to scientific expertise coming from politics, religion, and culture in general?
- What has Covid-19 taught us about the fantasy–reality continuum?
- What are the ethical constraints and restraints of the production of reality-congruent knowledge?
- Is there such a thing as a ‘scientific fantasy’? What are the scientific fantasies of our times?

Religion

- Can religion survive without fantasy? How much reality-congruence can religion bear?
- Can society survive without religious fantasy? What are the likely replacements – if any – for religion as a social glue?
- Was the secularisation thesis in sociology a scientific fantasy that is now coming to be debunked?
- Is the nineteenth-century conflict between religion and science still relevant in the twenty-first century?
- How are editions and interpretations of sacred religious texts affected by the political tensions, behavioural codes and sensibilities of a generation?
- How are we to understand the appeal of different kinds of religious extremism?
- Which religious organisations are still to some degree capable of maintaining a

monopoly of the means of orientation? Under what conditions?

- Should the Vatican be seen as the sole remaining court society in Europe, and does Elias's *Die höfische Gesellschaft / The Court Society* help in understanding its functioning?
- When religious leaders succumb to failures of judgment in political matters, is this related to their involvement in fantasies?

Politics

- How far can we move towards reducing the fantasy content in political discourse? What are the main challenges of moving towards more reality-congruent approaches to politics?
- What role, if any, has fantasy played in the resurgence of wars, notably Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022? Which fantasies are particularly prone to fuel warlike imaginaries and attitudes?
- How far can we move towards reducing the fantasy content in established–outsiders relations in general, in intra- and interstate relations? Can there be exclusion and integration without collective fantasies?
- Does the upsurge in magical-mythical thinking in politics constitute what Freud terms 'a return of the repressed'?
- What role do the media/politicians or bureaucrats have in retaining public standards and distinctions between fantasy and reality?
- Why are conspiracy theories so alluring?
- What changing role do fantasy, wish-fulfilment and paranoia play in the radical ideologies on the left and on the right in times of social tension and disorder?
- Are democracy and the rule of law political fantasies? What fantasies about democracy and the rule of law prevail in the radical ideologies of our times?
- Can process sociology help illuminate the notion of 'post-truth'?

Culture

- Are fantasy and imagination the same thing?
- Elias's interests included the utopian and dystopian aspects of science fiction for their insights into the collective fantasies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. How does twenty-first-century science fiction appear in the light of figurational sociology?
- To what extent do the forms of artistic expression reflect the reality–fantasy tensions of our own time?
- What is the contribution of biographical studies to understanding the role of fantasy in artistic creativity?
- What is the role of social media as a domain of individual and collective fantasising?
- Where are museums located on the fantasy–reality continuum? What is the function of contemporary museums of anxiety, guilt, and terror?
- What effect do climate change, public health crisis and economic crisis have on the fantasies of consumption and advertising: car ownership, air travel, tourism, etc.? How does it change everyday culture?

General

- How can we build on, revise, or improve on the idea of the fantasy–reality continuum? What theoretical perspectives can offer a starting point for it?
- What are the determinants of our thinking about reality-fantasy continuum and its changes, including in particular the colonial and gender ones? How is our knowledge situated in terms of moving between fantasy and reality?
- What long-term shifts in socio-political conditions, including changes of class structures, political systems and geopolitical alliances have allowed the flourishing of increasing degrees of fantasy-based knowledge?
- Is ‘future’ yet another fantasy?