

Laudatio for Richard Kilminster

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The Latin term *laudatio* means ‘praise’. It is the term used in German for a speech of this sort, and I prefer it to the available English alternatives: ‘eulogy’ usually requires the lauded person to be dead; ‘tribute’ is not much better; and ‘encomium’ sounds like a letter of support for a job application. So ‘Laudatio’ it is – but the more important part of my title is ‘Richard Kilminster’. ^[1]_[#N1]

Academically, Richard and I have always seen eye to eye, even if not in every other aspect of life. Richard has for example always been less ‘political’ than I am, and more in tune with the popular tastes of our time. I recall that, after I had indulged in one of my rants against American popular culture, Richard responded that ‘It’s the only show in town’ – whereas I regard the USA as a cultural Chernobyl. The last words of his first book are relevant: ‘The Leninists have only imposed change on the world; the point however is to understand it’ (Kilminster 1979: 269). I want to understand it too, but anger bubbles more readily to the surface than it does for the always relatively more detached Richard. (That has not prevented *both* of us from spitting blood over the stupidity of Brexit!)

We think of Richard as a hard-bitten academic, and a single-minded sociological theorist. But he has hidden depths and unsuspected skills. To begin with, he went to university rather late, to the University of Essex, where he studied sociology along with a minor in literature. That was after he had been working for six years in local government, in the area of legal affairs. In consequence, he can not only touch-type in the proper fashion, but he also has that now rare skill of being able to write shorthand. As a student, he had vacation jobs including working on a road gang and driving a dumper truck. (Perhaps it was a return to these roots that led him, after retirement, to pass the advanced driving test of the Institute of Advanced Motorists.)

In the outstanding Department of Sociology at Essex, which was then emerging as a dominant force in British sociology, Richard encountered among many others the superstar philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and the far less well-known, but ultimately more congenial and inspiring, Hermínio Martins (who had also taught and inspired me in the USA). After Essex, Richard went to the University of Leicester to study for his MA. There, of course, he encountered Norbert Elias for the first time – a turning point in Richard’s academic life. I have always been a bit envious of Richard for having actually been taught by Elias, which I never was. And over the following years he spent far more time talking to, and corresponding with, Norbert than I ever did. I had to make do mainly with learning about Elias’s ideas and about processual thinking from Joop Goudsblom more than I did directly from Elias himself – as well as learning from other friends, including Eric Dunning, Cas Wouters and Richard himself. And we of the younger generation – now growing old – all learned from each other.

I cannot remember *exactly* when I first met Richard in person. But not long after I met Norbert Elias in 1972, I remember Norbert mentioning that he had another young sympathiser in Leeds, by the name of Kilminster. We soon got to know each other. But for some years afterwards, Richard, Eric Dunning and I felt decidedly lonely – it sometimes seemed that in Britain there were just us three Elias enthusiasts. There were in fact a few more, but they were mainly older friends of Norbert’s. ‘We few, we happy few’ – except that in some

respects it was not always an entirely happy experience. In the 1970s, everyone seemed to have allegiance to one theory or another, and the resulting ‘war of the schools’ almost destroyed British sociology. Afterwards, perhaps as a means of survival, a sort of flaccid eclecticism set in, and it became deeply unfashionable to have much of an allegiance to anything. Sociology has fragmented into countless little empirical fields, which tend not to talk much to each other. Meanwhile sociological theory – or ‘social theory’ to use the current objectionable term – has since become a rather self-contained specialism in its own right.

In the 1970s, Elias was little known in academic circles beyond Leicester, and little regarded by the British academic establishment. So even at that early stage, our little group were often regarded as at least mildly eccentric by mainstream sociology. It *was* eccentric then to express our growing belief that Elias was a sociological thinker of major and *enduring* significance. I emphasise *enduring*, because since the 1970s sociological theory has flitted from one briefly fashionable theorist to another, chasing a series of fads and fashions that continues to this day.

Our sense of isolation was soon diminished when we gradually became aware that Elias was already becoming an academic celebrity – or at least enjoying a *succès d’estime* – in the Netherlands and Germany, thanks to the advocacy especially of Joop Goudsblom, Hermann Korte and the late Peter Gleichmann. The first big coming together in Britain of the growing international circle came in January 1980, when Eric and I organised a meeting in Balliol College, Oxford, of the Theory Group of the British Sociological Association. Normally such gatherings attracted maybe a score of participants. We were overwhelmed by floods of people not just from Britain, but from the Netherlands and Germany and further afield – Finland, I remember, even Australia. Tony Giddens arrived unannounced from Cambridge and totally disrupted my carefully arranged programme for the first morning, by indulging in an impromptu debate with Norbert.

The Balliol conference is memorable for at least three reasons:

1. The College appeared to have no heating that one could notice, and it also had the most appalling food, to the familiar embarrassment of us Brits. (I particularly remember something I described at the time as a ‘fried bread stewed apple sandwich’; it was only much later that I worked out that it was supposed to be Apple Charlotte. Our guests from the continent viewed the food with an embarrassed stupefaction.)
2. More important, it marked the formation of what Tom Scheff calls an ‘academic gang’, composed of many of us who were meeting for the first time; to give it a more dignified title, the ‘gang’ gradually evolved into a much larger, worldwide ‘research network’.
3. As I remember it, Richard was central to the conference, because many of the discussions revolved around Elias’s theory of knowledge and the sciences. At the time, I knew relatively little about that, but it was Richard’s particular interest.

One should never underestimate the significance of close personal friendships in academic life, and after that conference we (I think I can speak for Richard as well as myself) had much closer and more frequent contact with our new ‘Continental’ friends than we did with British colleagues beyond our own universities. I am thinking especially of such old friends as Joop Goudsblom, Cas Wouters, Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, Abram de Swaan, Nico Wilterdink, Christien Brinkgreve, Pieter Spierenburg, Hermann Korte, Artur Bogner, Helmut Kuzmics and Reinhard Blomert. For example, Richard and Cas and I have all written articles with each other. In a recent email, Richard spoke of, ‘all these creative years of the figurational network’ (Kilminster, 2018, pers. comm.). ‘We have done great things’, he said, meaning not each of us individually but rather the network of friends together.

Richard and I had a crucial conversation while walking over to get a cup of Balliol’s undrinkable coffee. Richard has only a hazy recollection of the conversation, and I do not remember every word of it. But the gist of it was that we recognised that many in the large audience just could not understand Elias because they

could not place where Elias was coming from intellectually. Many of the questions put to Elias by the audience had already centred on how Elias related to various earlier sociologists, and *especially* to assorted philosophers. One has to remember that this was less than two years after just the first volume of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had finally appeared in English translation. And the number of his other publications was then quite limited. We understood the audience's difficulty: *we* had been through the same process, and perhaps were still doing so. Richard had just the previous year published his first book, *Praxis and Method*, subtitled *A Sociological Dialogue with Lukács, Gramsci and the Early Frankfurt School* (Kilminster 1979). In it, Richard demonstrated his mastery of heavy philosophy-permeated theory, but Elias was only mentioned directly in one footnote. Close reading, however, reveals that Elias was a strong submarine presence in Richard's thinking. Why submarine? I think both of us were ourselves still striving to locate and digest Elias. As Richard was later to write, Elias seemed to be a 'prophet who came from nowhere with a completely worked out theoretical framework ready for us to take up'. He remembered that the postgraduates in Leicester joked that 'the only possible explanation for Norbert's precocious originality was that he must be a spaceman, or at least had his brain rewired by aliens. In the absence of extensive evidence to the contrary, this was as plausible a hypothesis as any!' (Kilminster 1996).

We agreed that someone needed to undertake the task of explaining Elias to the general sociological public. As I remember it, I agreed I should try to write a book expounding Elias's work in general. Richard was to follow his own inclination and explore the deeper 'philosophical' foundations of Elias's thinking. I put 'philosophical' in quotation marks, because the whole point of Elias's line of thought was that sociology needed to emancipate itself from the hegemony of the philosophers. Ultimately, in the title of his 2007 book, Richard was to refer to it as 'post-philosophical sociology'.

I myself leaned towards the more empirical and historical side of Elias's work. I had, it is true, read a lot of philosophy of science in the early years of my career, but Elias rather discouraged me from reading much more. He liked to emphasise that sociology must be simultaneously theoretical *and* empirical, and he encouraged me in my work on food, which I was just starting at the time. Richard, however, recognised the desperate need to tackle the much more difficult task of situating Elias in the context of familiar landmarks of intellectual history. This, Elias positively discouraged. I'm reminded of the wonderful story that David Kettler tells about the conference in New York marking the publication of the English translation of the first volume of *The Civilising Process* in 1978:

a very attractive young black woman in one of the last rows at the very back asked whether it wasn't true that the argument he'd presented followed quite closely a major theme initiated by Durkheim and pursued by his students. Elias bounced off the [platform] and rushed three-quarters of the way down the aisle. Gesticulating, he called out in voice made a little shrill by his excitement: 'Young woman', he said, 'young woman, you must not listen to those old geezers!' (Kettler 2009: 5).

Elias was 81 at the time, so clearly qualified for the title of 'old geezer' himself! And if he took that attitude towards Durkheim – whose empirical studies he often recommended – he felt much more strongly about the old geezers of the philosophical persuasion. Yet, of course, he himself *had* actually read all these old geezers!

It took some years for our books to appear. My own *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image* came out in 1989 (Mennell 1989), [2],[#N2], and Richard's *The Sociological Revolution and Norbert Elias: Post-philosophical Sociology* in 1998 and 2007 respectively (Kilminster 1988; 2007). By 1987, I had written two or three chapters, when Elias forbade me to go any further. He said to me, 'Stephen, while I am alive, I am the

best person to explain my ideas'. I thought, 'Oh, no, you are not, Norbert!', but I did not dare say so. Then Richard resolved the impasse by telling him that he too planned to write a book, whereupon Elias resigned himself to both of us writing about him. This story gives a tiny insight into the dynamics of the court society that had formed around King Norbert XIV in his last years.

Richard proceeded to read the old philosophical geezers from Descartes to Heidegger, but he did so in order to immunise himself against them. In 1995, he presented me with a copy of a slim little volume of just 64 pages, *Bluff your way in Philosophy* (Hankinson 1985). Inside, he had written: 'For Stephen – this contains *all* you need to know. Pp. 53 ff. is particularly insightful.' Pages 53–6 are a chapter on 'Some Useful Techniques' for self-presentation and self-promotion as a philosopher. Some of the suggestions are:

1. *The Question*. It is always a good idea to couch your remarks in the form of a question, particularly if you've no idea what you are talking about, as happens 85 per cent of the time in philosophy. ...

2. *The Hedge*. Never commit yourself: if it's possible to hedge, and it nearly always is in philosophy, then hedge. ...

3. *Delivery*. It is important to make your contributions in the right tone of voice; this should be slow, measured and considered ... you will find that the most blatant drivel can be made to sound both intelligent and profound. ...

7. *Language*. Select a few pieces of jargon you like the sound of and flog them to death. And remember the Golden Rule: never say anything in English if you can say it in some other language (preferably German).

8–9. *Playing for Time / Pretence of Profundity*. It is never out of order to remark, with an air of deep seriousness, that you will have to give the matter more thought. This ... tends to make your adversary feel intellectually inferior. This ... is particularly true if the matter in question is in fact something blindingly obvious. Remember: *always* strive to complicate the essentially simple. ... 'It really is much more difficult than most people give it credit for' is a great phrase to use in a crisis.

There is a serious intellectual question behind all this. Norbert Elias emerged from philosophy and into sociology with the growing intention to leave philosophy behind. In effect, he set out to transform ancient philosophical questions into sociological questions that could be investigated in a theoretical–empirical way. Yet it often appeared, when Tony Giddens was briefly 'ventriloquist of the *Zeitgeist*' (as Hermínio Martins called him in conversation), that *his* strategy was to turn empirically researchable questions into philosophical ones. Zygmunt Bauman is another 'social theorist' whose writings are peppered with references to philosophers. It is a great pity that 'social theory' has – as I remarked – turned into an elite speciality within sociology but very much under the hegemony of philosophy. The philosophers continue to dance their ancient round dance, while empirical sociologists largely ignore 'social theory' and get on with their today-centred research. Or, almost worse, they eclectically scatter bits and pieces of 'theory' like 'hundred and thousands' over an empirical cake that they have already baked.

The philosophical hegemony is part of a more general problem, which Elias (2009) discussed in his essay 'Scientific establishments'. [31][#N3] Rather as in the case of the people of the 'Village' and the 'Estate', in Elias and Scotson's (2008 [1965]) study *The Established and the Outsiders*, power and prestige in academe tend to attach to the groups who have been there the longest. The prestige hierarchy of disciplines in universities

resembles Comte's hierarchy of the sciences. [4],[#N4]All the modern disciplines have evolved out of the protoplasm that in the medieval university was just called 'philosophy'. The humanities and social sciences need to be brought more fully into Comte's picture. That includes history and philology, which jointly came out of the hermeneutic revolution in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the social sciences – economics, anthropology, political science and then sociology, roughly in that order. The poor sociologists do not have much to look down on, apart perhaps from media studies. But, Elias implies, what really remains of philosophy? Is it not just an empty husk out of which all the other disciplines grew? Not in terms of its lasting prestige, it is not.

This, then, is some of the background to Richard's major achievement, distilled in his 1998 and 2007 books. Others have traced the emergence of sociology as a discipline relatively autonomous from philosophy, notably Johan Heilbron (1990) in his book about French sociology in the nineteenth century, *Het ontstaan van de sociologie*. Unfortunately, Polity Press, Tony Giddens's publishing house, ruined the entire message by publishing the English translation under the title *The Rise of Social Theory* (Heilbron 1995) – using Giddens's execrable term 'social theory' to kowtow to the philosophers again! Richard was much more radical and provocative in speaking defiantly of a *post-philosophical* sociology.

But, Richard recognised, in order to lay secure foundations for a post-philosophical sociology, one had to be familiar with how philosophers think. Both at the Balliol conference and in seminars such as one that Richard remembers in Leeds in 1974, Elias provoked anger – indeed made enemies – by refusing to engage in the familiar philosophical ways, and insisting in always proceeding in his own defiantly *sociological* mode. One problem was that, although he had read the really old philosophical codgers in his youth, and left them behind, he refused to see the point in reading and situating himself in relation to more recently influential schools of philosophy. In Richard's (1996) words, 'There were ... significant gaps in his knowledge, for example, pragmatism, the Anglo-Saxon analytical school and the British Hegelians which, on principle, he would not fill'. This unorthodox attitude exposed Elias

to the risk of readers – apart from those close to him and therefore able to give him the benefit of the doubt – finding in his books apparent similarities with the ideas of others and, failing to grasp the synthetic character of his work, simply therefore writing him off as offering nothing new. Even worse, becoming angry that he was passing off the contributions of others as his own. In the context of conventional academic life, his not discussing other writers was regarded by many simply as a weakness. I heard these misgivings again and again.

In his own work, Richard has 'sought to show how far sociologists have acquiesced in philosophers' distinctions, categories and other stipulations.'

Norbert's contention that the advent of sociology had taken the problems previously elaborated by philosophers and transposed them on to another level, could only be sustained, I discovered, by showing in detail how this had occurred. In other words, one had to read the philosophers in order to demonstrate *credibly*, beyond simple assertion, one of the basic tenets of Norbert's position (Kilminster 1996: unpaginated).

And Richard (Kilminster 19 February 2018, pers. comm.) has since added, succinctly, that 'Norbert didn't always seem to be aware of the fact that if you don't show you are listening to others, no-one will listen to you. He went his own way.'

Richard achieved all this against the background of a certain intellectual tension over years and decades with his PhD supervisor, Professor and Head of Department Zygmunt Bauman. Before I even met Richard, I remember Elias (1974 pers. comm.) saying to me that Bauman was ‘A Marxist, but a very intelligent Marxist’. Richard has always stressed that Zygmunt was in most respects a good friend, who was very learned and taught him a lot. Indeed, with Ian Varcoe, Richard (1996) edited a *Festschrift* for Zygmunt. Nevertheless, as years went by and Richard became an ever firmer advocate of the ideas of Norbert Elias, intellectual disagreements with Zygmunt became more pronounced. It was not just that Bauman’s writings always continued to be peppered with references to philosophers, invoked as sources of authority. It was also that Bauman took no interest in what Elias (2012a: 449) once referred to as his ‘historical social psychology’. Richard expressed the intellectual problem eloquently in a recent email to me. We were discussing some critical remarks that I had just published about how American individualism distorts American sociology (Mennell 2017). Richard wrote:

this kind of attitude towards individualism chimes in with the classical Utilitarian moral precept that individuals must be the judges of their own utility, which will manifest itself in their behaviour – the sovereign individual writ large. Marx takes this over from political economy, so conspicuously has no interest whatsoever in personalities, emotions or individual feeling states, something which shows up later in Zygmunt’s ignorance of psychoanalysis and lack of sustained interest in a sociological psychology. Nowhere does he develop in any way a concept resembling ‘habitus’ or ‘figuration’ to bridge the chasm between individual and society, micro/macro, etc. (Kilminster 8 January 2018, pers. comm.).

I think that is quite profound. Although my own first degree was in economics, so that I have long been familiar with the principle of revealed preference, I had never made the connection between it and Marxism, psychoanalysis and habitus.

Let me now say something about Richard’s role in the publication of Norbert Elias’s Collected Works in 18 volumes. When we first discussed this project, the board of the Norbert Elias Foundation immediately and without discussion decided that Richard should be asked to serve as chair of the Editorial Advisory Board. So he and I worked closely and amicably together from around 2003 until the final volume was published in 2014. Of course, we occasionally consulted the other members of the advisory board – Eric Dunning, Johan Heilbron and Robert van Krieken – but most of the time the two of us easily resolved any problems in phone calls, Skype sessions and, once in a while, face to face meetings. As I said at the opening of the conference in Leicester marking the completion of the Collected Works in 2014,

Richard’s name appears as an editor on the title pages of no fewer than seven of the volumes. Richard and I are particularly proud of the three volumes of Elias’s essays that we jointly edited [(Elias 2008; 2009a; 2009b)]. It is not just that many of the essays had appeared in quite obscure places and were difficult to obtain, but that bringing them all together revealed a corpus of writing that is of the greatest importance. The essays on the sociology of knowledge and the sciences in volume 14 [for which Richard was mainly responsible] are in themselves of a significance that no professional social scientist should overlook, while the range of topics covered in volumes 15 and 16 is quite breathtaking (Mennell 2014).

Richard can also take special pride in the new edition of Elias’s last book, *The Symbol Theory* (Elias 2011 [1989]). Elias had put the original in Richard’s hands, but then rather tied them behind his back. For the new

edition, Richard talked to Elias's last assistants to find just how the text had tortuously emerged, and he tracked down the Microsoft Word file of Elias's *completed* Introduction to the book – after Elias's death he had originally been given an unfinished version. He also used his great ingenuity to insert chapter titles, thus making more digestible and accessible what had been written as a single long text interrupted only by Roman numerals. This was an act of defiance: Elias had expressly forbidden it, but the results amply demonstrate that in such matters, if no others, Elias's judgement was not always sound.

Many of our colleagues have seen our work on the Collected Works as a labour of love, with the emphasis on 'labour'. Yet such was the exhilaration of the intense and prolonged exposure we shared to the entire corpus of Elias's writings that Richard and I are agreed that we are still suffering withdrawal symptoms.

The conference held in Leeds to mark Richard's seventy-fifth birthday in April 2018 was a recognition of the magnitude of Richard's achievement over the course of his career to date. What I haven't mentioned so far is that Richard has also been an outstanding and inspiring teacher. Barbara mentioned one indicator of this that she could see from her desk at UCD Press: quite a lot of orders for volumes of the Collected Works came from customers who mentioned that they had been students of Richard's in Leeds. The attendance list is also a reminder of the impressive number and distinction of Richard's students, undergraduate and postgraduate: those present include: Tim Bickerstaffe, Ian Burkitt, Peter Emmerson, John Lever, Cath Morgan, Ryan Powell, Alan Scott, Phil Sutton, Stephen Vertigans, Terry Wassall and Paul Watt. I hope I have not left anyone out – please put your hand up if I have! These protégé(e)s of Richard's constitute an intellectual legacy in their own right.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think I should mention that, although we think of Richard as a cerebral, dedicated theorist, he has occasionally been known to venture into the interpretation of empirical events. My personal favourite is his essay on streaking – the phenomenon of young men and women displaying their nakedness, usually at sports events (Kilminster 1988). This was especially common in the 1970s and 1980s. Elias remarked to Richard that the crucial point was probably that they *fled*, running, through the scene. Richard took it from there. Perhaps typically, Richard seems not to have considered the essay important enough actually to publish it. But, if you are in search of minor titillation, you can now read it on the 'Classic Essays' section of the Norbert Elias Foundation's website.

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Notes

1. This paper was delivered at the conference 'The Sociology of Sociology in Long-term Perspective' in honour of Richard Kilminster, University of Leeds, 5–6 April 2018* [\[#N1-ptri\]](#)

2. Subsequent editions published under the title *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*.[↗][\[#N2-ptr1\]](#)
3. See also Johan Goudsblom (1990), 'The humanities and the social sciences'.[↗][\[#N3-ptr1\]](#)
4. Elias took an unfashionably favourable view of Comte's writings; see Elias (2012b: 28–45).[↗][\[#N4-ptr1\]](#)

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