

Editor's Introduction: Long-term perspectives on the human condition

Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2012

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0001.101> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0001.101>]

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How strange these people are

How strange I am

How strange we are

– Norbert Elias

Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.

[Who knows only his own generation remains always a child.]

– Cicero, *De Oratore*

Representatives of the various natural and social sciences have frequently claimed that the discipline that they themselves practise provides the overarching framework for the study of humanity. In the mid nineteenth century, Auguste Comte conceived of a hierarchy of the sciences, starting with astronomy, physics and chemistry and ascending through biology to the study of human beings, of which he spoke as 'the queen of the sciences'. Sociologists have traditionally claimed that crown for themselves, although psychologists have sometimes made rival bids for it. Biologists too, undaunted by Comte placing them one rung down, have continued to claim special insight into human functioning, no more so that since the rise of modern genetics and brain science. Meanwhile philosophy, the medieval protoplasm out of which most of the natural and social sciences and the humanities evolved, has continued to enjoy extraordinary prestige – even though many philosophers appear to consider it unnecessary to make themselves familiar with the findings of the modern natural and, especially, social sciences.

Such claims for academic primacy can be partly explained as contests for territory – staff and research funds – between scientific establishments (Elias 2009: 107–60) within modern universities. But they are intellectually beside the point: Comte's model of the hierarchy of the sciences was specifically part of an argument *against* reductionism. Whoever practised in the domain of the 'queen of the sciences' had to grasp and to synthesise the knowledge gathered at every rung of the ladder. Such a task appears wildly improbable; Leibniz was famously described as the last person who knew everything, and he died in 1716! Yet in the first half of the twentieth century, there were major intellectual figures like Max Weber who straddled numerous disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Only late in life did Weber finally describe himself as a 'sociologist', and he has remained especially revered among sociologists. Yet one wonders whether, were he on the academic scene today, he would be considered quite respectable: those who assert intellectual 'parenthood' and superiority for their own disciplines also often insinuate that others are akin to intellectual foragers living off funds of knowledge generated elsewhere. Since the generation of Weber the process of intellectual specialisation has made it ever more difficult for scholars to keep in mind the 'big picture' of which their own work is a small detail. The type of specialization that prevails in the academic world today tends to narrow intellectual horizons. The trajectory is towards a somewhat sinister Taylorisation of academic life, as academic disciplines fragment into ever more distinct specialities communicating less and less with each other. The narrowness of citations *across* disciplines is one reflection of this trend, and so is the increasing proliferation of highly specialised academic journals. This dynamic, it is true, is partly generated by endogenous forces – by the sheer volume of research output in the modern university in particular. But that is

interlinked with exogenous forces. Scholars are coming under increasing pressure to adopt narrower perspectives and to focus their research more closely; the pressure comes most immediately from their universities, but university administrations are responding in turn to pressures from governments and from big business. In return for massive public and private investment in today's gargantuan higher education systems, government and business now nakedly demand that research be immediately 'useful', that it be judged by its contribution directly to economic growth or to the solution of short-term social problems.

'Short-term' – which serves to raise a related problem. 'Usefulness' is too often today associated with implicit sympathy for Henry Ford's dictum that 'history is bunk'. Symptoms are widespread. Over recent decades, economic history has come to form a much-diminished part of university economics syllabuses, or indeed has disappeared from them entirely. Ignorance of economic history among professional economists, especially the large numbers of them employed in stock-broking and banking, has been argued to have contributed to the world's economic crisis that began in 2007–8 – surely an argument for the 'usefulness' of knowledge about the past. As for sociology, even though its Holy Trinity of founding fathers – Marx, Weber and Durkheim – were all concerned with questions of long-term social development, the discipline has become predominantly 'hodiecentric' or present-centred. [1][#N1] Too often, if sociological research reports mention the past at all, it is in a separate chapter headed 'historical background'. Like economic history within economics, so historical sociology has come to be seen as just one more separate speciality within sociology.

One of the guiding principles of our new journal, *Human Figurations*, is that history is not just 'background' but rather the very stuff out of which can be constructed a proper understanding of the human condition as we observe it today. Developments in many disciplines are pointing in the same intellectual direction, that is, away from a retreat into the present and towards the need for a longer-term perspective. Examples include: psychological theories about the evolution of human intelligence and consciousness (for instance Humphrey 1998); global ecology (Lovelock 2009); biological evolution (Margulis 1998) and developments in international relations (Smith 1999; Linklater 2011). There are also studies that attempt to keep focus simultaneously on processes working at what Elias (following biologists such as Joseph Needham and C H Waddington) called different levels of integration and over wildly different timescales such as David Christian's *Maps of Time* (2011), Fred Spier's work on *Big History and the Future of Humanity* and, in biology, Jablonka and Lamb's groundbreaking examination of *Evolution in Four Dimensions*.

The journal is a modest attempt to help counteract the related trends of specialisation, fragmentation and hodiecentrism within the many disciplines that contribute to understanding the human condition. That is indicated by our subtitle: *long-term perspectives on the human condition*. Produced online through the expertise of MPublishing, the publishing arm of the University of Michigan, this new journal is launched with the support of the Norbert Elias Foundation, Amsterdam. It is conceived *in the spirit of* German–British sociologist, Norbert Elias (1897–1990), but it is *not* intended to be a platform exclusively for the dissemination either of Elias's own work or of the many contemporary scholars working under his influence. His writings ranged from the growth of knowledge and the sciences, through state formation and (most famously) civilising processes and their gradual impact on modal personality structure or habitus, to violence, time, sport and leisure, ageing and dying, literature and poetry (his own and others'), utopias and the relations between the sexes – a feat that is increasingly difficult to achieve in the current intellectual climate. [2][#N2] Our ambition is to publish articles from a comparably wide variety of disciplines, as the range of the invited essays in this first issue demonstrates – whether they complement, qualify, contradict or expand upon the perspectives that Elias himself advanced.

Moreover, just as Elias used to emphasise that there were no zero-points – no absolute beginnings – in the long-term processes he studied, so there are much older precursors for the broad perspectives on the study of

humanity that he advocated. From among many, we may point to Cicero, who defended all those arts pertaining to humanity – *humanitas* – and to the whole development of human society from its earliest origins. For they had, in his words, ‘a common bond, and are joined among themselves as if by a common likeness’ (*Pro Archia*, 1.2). The breadth of Cicero’s influence extended beyond the political and philosophical to the cosmological: Cicero’s writings were one source of Copernicus’ insight into the movement of the earth around the sun. Both Cicero and Elias sought, in different ways and at different historical junctures, to promote a systematic and liberal understanding of the human condition through a wide lens of integrated and cumulative knowledge.

Human Figurations aims to establish a permanent platform for discussions between writers studying all aspects of the human condition from biological evolution through to ecology, international relations and beyond; to draw attention to significant discoveries and innovations not only within but, importantly, across disciplines and to explore their implications for our cumulative understanding of the human condition; to counteract the increasing fragmentation of academic life into a growing number of seemingly unconnected specialisms; and, finally, it seeks to counteract the dominant trend towards static and short-term approaches to the human condition. It aims to stimulate long-term, comparative and dynamic perspectives.

Issue One includes a set of invited papers. Their authors have taken bold and innovative approaches to the study of the human condition, while also establishing intellectual links across such diverse disciplines as musicology, sport, geology, international relations, history and sociology. We are most grateful for their support of the intellectual aims of the journal in this way.

The internationally renowned cultural historian Peter Burke places Elias in relation to other sociologists of knowledge in order to focus on the rise and institutionalisation of disciplines in the humanities, social sciences and the natural sciences. Fittingly, he examines the processes of professionalisation and specialisation that took place in Europe, the USA and elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, in so doing, he poses the challenging question of whether competition leads to innovation, to product differentiation in the intellectual domain, or whether innovation is likely to happen anyway.

Moving from history to musicology, Olle Edström takes a more personal approach to what Theodor Adorno – critical theorist of the Frankfurt School and a classically trained pianist and composer – and Norbert Elias’s writings have meant to him over the course of his historical and ethnomusicological study of the culture and special singing tradition (*yoik*) of the Saami in northern Scandinavia.

In contrast, Andrew Linklater makes the case for a more comprehensive and longer-term understanding of the paradoxes of global interconnectedness in the field of international relations. Within the academic discipline of International Relations many scholars have tended towards a hodiecentric assumption that relations between states past and present have always operated on unchanging principles. Linklater seeks to counter the assumption that the similarities between different historical eras are more profound than their differences, particularly around the suppositions of a state of anarchy (understood as the absence of government). In particular, he considers the importance of a long-term analysis in assessing the prospects for embedding a cosmopolitan harm principle and associated ‘social standards of self-restraint’ in an international society, itself faced with the enormous challenge of bringing partially regulated global processes under greater collective control.

Joseph Maguire also examines global relations, in his case in the context of European body cultures. Through the lens of sport he casts light on the character of, and transformations wrought by, global processes more generally. He poses several questions around the role of sport in assisting in the building of friendship and emotional identification between people and nations. Conversely, he also asks whether globalisation processes been accompanied by a more powerful decivilising counter-thrust, in which people have reacted

aggressively to the encroachment of alien values, artifacts and cultural products, of which modern sport is an example *par excellence*.

Gary Wickham and Barbara Evers explore the similarities between, on the one hand, Elias's work on the connection between the development of the state and the development of constraints on individual behaviour, which he refers to as a civilising process, and, on the other hand, the seventeenth century work of the English political thinker Thomas Hobbes on the connection between the development of sovereignty and the development of more disciplined subjects. In particular, they concentrate on the way each thinker sets out the processes by which individuals are trained to avoid violence towards one another and to live a more peaceable existence; in so doing, they explore their common debt to the early modern revival of certain Epicurean and Stoic currents, both in regard to the content of their respective arguments and in regard to the commitment they shared to an empiricist method.

Joop Goudsblom places the theme of energy and civilisation on a far broader canvass. Partly following in Elias's own footsteps, he extended the scope of his inquiries to humankind at large, from its earliest beginnings, and including the relationships between humans and other animals. He returns, then, to the original sociological programme formulated by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, but draws upon new insights from biology, anthropology, archaeology, ecology, and even geology. He argues that, just like energy, the process of civilisation is a process that can be observed and studied as a process of collective learning. Goudsblom also reconsiders the well-known fact that, in the course of time, humans have learned to exploit more and more sources of energy. This has required new technologies, new forms of social organisation, and new individual skills. In the latter sense, learning to exploit new sources of energy was also a process of civilisation, involving new forms of personal discipline.

Aptly, this issue concludes with Peter Westbroek's exploration of a strategy for the creation of consilience among the sciences of nature and humanity in which the relatively new discipline of *Earth System Science* provides the overall framework. This field seeks a top-down system's approach to this planet, embracing the full span of geological history. The ultimate goal of Westbroek's proposed undertaking is to combine two mathematical models, one representing Earth history and dynamics and the other the *civilising process* in Elias's sense (2000) – that is, the dynamics of the 'world of humanity', from the origins up to its present state.

Just forty years ago, in 1972 Norbert Elias himself proposed the establishment of a new journal with broad terms of reference. 'Nothing is more striking in our time', he wrote, 'than the rate of change, the dynamic character of the social universe which [human beings] form with each other'. The rate of change may be steadily accelerating, but the dynamic of the social universe cannot be understood – not can it be brought under greater human control – without an understanding of its past. As Cicero remarked, 'Who knows only his own generation remains always a child'.

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Notes

1. 'Hodiecentric' is a neat neologism by Goudsblom (1977).[♣] [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. Elias's Collected Works are currently being published in 18 volumes by UCD Press, Dublin; see www.ucdpress.ie [\[http://www.ucdpress.ie\]](http://www.ucdpress.ie).[♣] [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644