

Norbert Elias and the social history of knowledge

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ABSTRACT: This article is concerned with Norbert Elias as a sociologist of knowledge. It concentrates on the ways in which his ideas may be employed and adapted in a future social history (or historical sociology) of knowledge. It focuses on a case-study, that of the professionalization and specialization of knowledge (or knowledges in the plural), that took place in the USA and Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, comparing and contrasting the ideas of Elias on the sociology of scientific establishments to those of Bourdieu on 'homo academicus' and Joseph Ben-David on German universities.

KEYWORDS: professionalization; specialization; scientific establishments; intellectual competition

The most appropriate tribute to theorists is to continue to think with their ideas, [1][#N1] testing them by seeing whether they fit different places, periods or situations, and extending, reducing or otherwise modifying their conclusions wherever necessary. [2][#N2] This is what I propose to do here in the case of Norbert Elias on the historical sociology – or social history – of knowledge. The articles by Elias cited here, which were scattered in different journals until most of them were brought together in 2009 in volume 14 of the *Collected Works*, [3][#N3] are not the best-known examples of his work, nor are they developed in the same concrete detail as his theory of civilizing processes or some of his other theories, about involvement and detachment or the established and the outsiders, for instance, both extremely relevant to Elias's sociology of knowledge.

However, it is not only the most fully developed ideas of leading theorists – the large finished paintings, one might call them – that are of use to posterity, but also the hints or sketches that they left behind. Indeed, the less fully developed ideas may be the most fruitful, because they offer more opportunities to later generations of scholars.

I

It may be useful to begin by attempting to place Elias relative to other sociologists of knowledge. The most obvious comparison is the one with Karl Mannheim, more exactly between the young Mannheim, in his thirties when he was writing about knowledge, and the old Elias, who (apart from what is implied in his 1956 essay 'Problems of involvement and detachment') published his first essay on the topic at the age of 74. I do not of course mean to describe Elias as a mere follower of Mannheim: he achieved much more in his long life than Mannheim in his relatively short one. In the 1980s, Elias criticized Mannheim's sociology of knowledge as no more than an unmasking of ideology. [4][#N4] All the same, his analysis of competition in the domain of knowledge – defended by Elias in the course of the famous clash between Mannheim and Alfred Weber at a sociological conference in Zürich in 1928 – obviously provided some inspiration (see Mannheim 1928, Pels 1996).

A more distant comparison might be between Norbert Elias and Thomas Kuhn, whose *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), with its famous concepts of 'paradigm', 'anomaly' and 'normal science, was discussed by

Elias on more than one occasion, objecting to the idea of revolution and suggesting ‘culmination and synthesis’ in its place (2009: 15n, 88, 93, 146). How sociological Kuhn’s approach to knowledge was remains a matter of dispute. He presented his work as an attempt at ‘the sociology of the scientific community’ (1962: ix), but it was famously criticized by Pierre Bourdieu for lacking a social dimension and granting science ‘le pouvoir de se développer selon sa logique immanente’ (1976: 90). [5].[#N5] However, if we accept Dick Pels’s point about the regrettable gulf between two intellectual traditions in the study of knowledge, the tradition of Mannheim and Robert Merton on one side and that of Wittgenstein, Kuhn and Latour on the other, then it may be time to recognize what Elias might contribute to healing the breach.

In fact, the relevance of the ideas of both *The Civilizing Process* and ‘Involvement and Detachment’ to the history of science was recognized over thirty years ago by Wolf Lepenies, who noted their ‘hints’ on links between the rise of detachment and ‘the development of a scientific way of acquiring knowledge’ (1977: 62). More recently, Steven Shapin (1994: 303–4 and passim) learned a somewhat different lesson from *The Civilizing Process* when he noted the links between science, ‘knowledge-claims’ and ‘civility’ in seventeenth-century England. [6].[#N6]

Less obvious comparisons might be made between Elias and Michel Foucault and Elias and Pierre Bourdieu, even though Elias only occasionally, and quite late in life, referred to their work. [7].[#N7] The German sociologist of communication Peter Ludes was surely thinking of the well-known interviews with Foucault (conducted in the 1970s and published as *Power/Knowledge*, 1980), when he interviewed Elias (1981) on the same topic in the 1980s. Elias and Foucault held a conception of power that was similar in important respects, regarding it as ‘an aspect of a relationship, of every human relationship’, as Elias (1981: 39) put it, rather than locating it exclusively in institutions. For his part, Foucault (1980: 203) spoke of power as ‘capillary’ and of ‘the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives’.

On the other hand, Elias’s rejection of Kuhn’s concept of scientific ‘revolution’ implies that he would have had little time for Foucault’s (or indeed Georges Canguilhem’s) notion of intellectual ‘ruptures’. [8].[#N8] He also differed from Mannheim, Kuhn and Foucault, all of whom were relativists of some kind, in expressing a belief in the possibility of what he called relatively ‘object-adequate’ or ‘reality-congruent’ knowledge (Elias 2009: 27, 54).

As for Bourdieu, the broad similarity between his concept of ‘fields’ and Elias on figurations is worth noting, not to mention the importance of the idea of habitus in the work of both theorists. Bourdieu was more incisive, epigrammatic and polemical, writing in short sharp sentences. Elias on the other hand was more long-winded but also more precise and he saw more nuances and more aspects to the questions he discussed. Turning to knowledge in particular, Bourdieu’s ‘cynical reason’, reducing intellectual debates to struggles for power, contrasts with Elias’s concern with both intellectual and socio-political factors. All the same, Bourdieu’s emphasis on competition in the intellectual sphere and ‘la lutte pour le monopole de la compétition scientifique’ (1976: 89) runs parallel to the ideas of Elias on knowledge, power and scientific establishments, to be discussed in the following section. [9].[#N9]

II

In the interview focused on knowledge and power, Elias (1981) argued that knowledge had been a priestly monopoly from ancient Egypt the end of the Middle Ages ‘and beyond’, and also that in the short term certain kinds of knowledge might be monopolized by experts, endowing the monopolisers with power, even though

‘in the long run scientific advances in knowledge cannot be monopolized effectively’. As for competition, discoveries, he suggested, are ‘fuelled’ by ‘national and social rivalries and conflicts’ (Elias, 1981: 204, 210, 221).

Returning to the topic in his essay on ‘Scientific Establishments’, Elias developed his ideas on monopolies of knowledge. In the first place, he described the ‘emergence of a scientific type of knowledge production’ following ‘the breakdown of the Church’s monopoly of the basic means of orientation’. However, science became established and in their turn scientific establishments, like ecclesiastical ones, ‘are able to exercise a monopolistic control’ of particular types of knowledge, including the skills for producing new knowledge’ (Elias, 2009: 135, 138, 140, 145). As for rivalries, Elias noted ‘the competition between scientists as individuals and as groups’ as a feature of the development of scientific knowledge. ‘The whole figuration is animated by a competitive struggle for preservation, avoidance of loss or rise of status and power chances’. There is also competition for economic resources (2009: 137, 147).

Another aspect of Elias’s outline of a theory of establishments might be summed up in one word: ‘territory’. The essential point is made by means of a recurrent political metaphor. ‘The departments of scientific knowledge, as constituted today, have some of the characteristics of sovereign states’. There is an obvious analogy between the formation of autonomous departments and the processes of state-formation famously discussed by Elias in the second part of his *Civilizing Process*, although that study was concerned with states that gradually became fewer and larger, while departments become ever more numerous (splitting off from older departments like new nations at the break-up of an empire). [10].[#N10]

As in the case of states, departments try to justify and to defend their autonomy. ‘Most of them are busily engaged in the task of proving to themselves and to all the world, the autonomy of their own field of studies in relation to other fields, thus trying to ensure their own autonomy as a professional group’. On one hand, they defend themselves against invasion, on the other they try to invade other fields, as in the case of the physicists ‘who, in the form of microbiology, have begun to colonize some branches of biology such as genetics, to transform them into provinces of the great physics empire’ (Elias, 2009: 156).

Although he was apparently unaware of Elias’s work, a British professor of education, Tony Becher, developed these ideas in a study with the engaging title of *Academic Tribes and Territories* (1989). The epigraph to Becher’s book is taken from the anthropologist F. G. Bailey, who once taught, like Becher, at the University of Sussex, and went on to make a field study of the University of San Diego. ‘Each tribe has a name and a territory, settles its own affairs, goes to war with the others, has a distinct language or at least a distinct dialect and a variety of ways of demonstrating its apartness from others’. Bailey (1977: 212) was actually referring to university students, teachers and administrators, not to departments, but the cap fits.

Like other central concepts in the social sciences, that of territory, which has of course given rise to a considerable literature, was not the invention of scholars in these fields but rather the elaboration of a folk concept. In this case the ‘folk’ are the scientists and other scholars who have long operated with an awareness of intellectual ‘fields’, ‘turf’ and ‘trespassing’. In the nineteenth century the physicist James Clerk Maxwell wrote to a friend about his intention to transgress the ‘game laws’ of science and to ‘poach’ some useful ideas (quoted by Merton, 1968). Perhaps the most original feature of Becher’s book was its focus on what the author called ‘population density’ in a given academic field, distinguishing between what he called ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ fields of low and high density respectively. ‘It is in the most heavily populated urban pockets that the fiercest tussles take place over the division of the spoils of research’ (Becher, 1989: 77–9, 91). Becher’s study was based on interviews with academics in a number of different disciplines. This direct approach gave the study its immediacy, at the price of producing a rather static description, as Elias would have been the first to point

out, had he reviewed the book. The author discusses specialisms and specialities but not the process of specialization. The following section attempts to compensate for this lack.

III

As we have seen, in the case of knowledge, as in that of other topics that he studied, Elias emphasized the importance of long-term processes. It therefore seems appropriate, in the attempt to make use of his ideas in a social history of knowledge, to focus on the rise and institutionalization of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences as well as in the natural sciences. [\[11\]\[#N11\]](#) In other words, what follows is mainly concerned with the process of professionalization and specialization that took place in Europe, the USA and elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An attempt will be made both to illustrate and on occasion to develop Elias's various hints and suggestions in this domain.

Before focusing on specialization, a brief comment on the intellectual consequences of national rivalries may be in order. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these consequences are clear enough: the space research driven by the rivalry between the USA and the USSR in the 1950s is perhaps the most obvious example. The competition between individuals such as Priestley and Lavoisier in chemistry or Young and Champollion in the race to decipher hieroglyphics was viewed at the time as a match between the British and the French, while the President of the Royal Society, Joseph Banks, saw William Herschel's discovery of Uranus as a victory of British astronomy over its French rival. In the 1860s, Victor Duruy, the French minister of education, described the intellectual progress of the Germans as 'a threat to French science' (quoted in Roche, 2001: 292).

In the case of archaeology, the French and the British competed in the middle of the nineteenth century to discover the remains of Assyrian culture. Henry Rawlinson, a soldier turned excavator, asked Austen Layard, a diplomat-archaeologist, to arouse the interest of Stratford Canning, the ambassador to the Ottoman court, because 'It pains me grievously to see the French monopolize the field'. Layard wrote to Canning that 'The national honour' was 'concerned in competing with the French in deciphering the cuneiform inscriptions'. On the other side the French archaeologist Victor Place declared that 'we must not let ourselves be outdistanced by England on a road which we ourselves have opened' (quoted by Larsen, 1996 [1994]: 67, 95, 310).

Encyclopaedias became another arena in which nations competed. 'Each "civilized nation" was expected to produce one to be taken seriously by its neighbours and the European powers' (Kamusella, 2009: 407). The point about encyclopedias as an arena for national rivalry might be illustrated from the story of the *Enciclopedia italiana*, which began relatively late in 1929. A few years earlier, in 1920, an Italian ex-minister had written of the need 'to give Italy, which lacks it, a national encyclopaedia like France, England, Germany and even Spain' (Turi, 2002: 18 and passim).

The metaphor of intellectual territory or empire was already in use in this context. An archaeological expedition to Central Asia was recommended to the German Minister of Culture in 1904 in the following terms: 'We Germans must use all our powers to secure for ourselves a rightful place in this sun' – thus echoing a famous phrase in a speech by the Kaiser delivered just three years earlier (Adolf Harnack, quoted in Marchand, 2009: 421). In the 1920s, the Dutch astronomer Willem Hendrik van den Bos described what he called 'a mad scramble for indiscriminate double-star discoveries' in the Southern Hemisphere, the intellectual equivalent of the 'scramble for Africa' by European empires (Pyenson, 1989: 65–6).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the years between 1850 and 1914, were an age of increasing intellectual and especially academic specialization. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte

coined the term *spécialisation*, and his example was followed by his English disciple John Stuart Mill (Oleson and Voss, 1979: 6). In English, the term 'specialist' is first recorded in a medical context (1856), but it soon came to be employed more widely, for example by another disciple of Comte's, Herbert Spencer.

In the early nineteenth century, it had still been possible for a creative individual to make original discoveries in several different fields. Alexander von Humboldt offers a spectacular example of this possibility, since his contributions extended to geology, astronomy, meteorology, botany, physiology, chemistry, geography, archaeology, political economy and ethnography (De Terra, 1955; Rupke, 2005). In Cambridge, William Whewell wrote books on mathematics, mechanics, mineralogy, astronomy, philosophy, theology and architecture and confessed his 'desire to read all manner of books at once' (Yeo, 1993: 57). However, the intellectual climate was cooling down and becoming less sympathetic to polymaths. Humboldt complained that 'people often say that I'm curious about too many things at once', while it was said of Whewell that 'omniscience is his foible'.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, universities, formerly teaching institutions, became centres of research as well, and one new discipline after another became independent. Germany and the USA were the pioneers in the institutionalization of disciplines in the form of separate faculties, institutes or departments. Sociology, for instance, emerged from law; anatomy and biology, from medicine; physiology from anatomy; philosophy from theology; and psychology from philosophy. Natural history split into three (geology, botany and zoology). Expressing his regret for this process via the metaphor that Elias would later employ, Whewell noted the danger that the 'commonwealth of science' would disintegrate 'like a great empire falling to pieces' (quoted in Smith and Agar, 1998: 184).

What drove the trend? Should it be explained in terms of agency (individual or collective) or structure? The early stages of 'discipline building' have been described by two well-known historians of science as 'a personal, sometimes heroic endeavour' (Thackray and Merton, 1972: 474). Scholars in most if not all disciplines have paid homage to individuals, founding fathers or patron saints. Botany has Linnaeus, for instance, palaeontology has Cuvier. Economics has Adam Smith, history has Ranke. Agricultural science has Liebig, experimental psychology has Wundt, while sociology has both Durkheim and Weber.

On the other hand, recent historians are critical of what they call 'founder myths' and some agree with Foucault that 'no one creates disciplines' (Lenoir, 1993: 76). For example, a historian of sociology has criticized the heroic interpretation of the history of the discipline as the history of founders, arguing that they were mere catalysts of a more general movement (Mucchielli, 1998: 527). In favour of collective or group agency is the fact that many new disciplines became established in universities some decades after societies had been founded to advance the subject, acting as pressure groups: to take only English examples, the Astronomical Society (1820), Political Economy Club (1821), Zoological Society (1826), Geographical Society (1830), Botanical Society (1836), Ethnological Society (1843), Anthropological Society (1863).

If we look for impersonal explanations, there are two obvious alternatives, the internalist and the externalist. The internalist explanation emphasises the 'growth' or even the 'explosion' of knowledge, the problem of information 'overload' and the consequent need for scholars to reduce their ambitions and resolve to learn more about less. This kind of explanation is of course vulnerable to the kind of criticism that Bourdieu, quoted above, made of Kuhn, that of leaving out the social context and ignoring what Mannheim used to call the 'situatedness' of ideas, their *Situationsgebundenheit*.

The alternative explanation is externalist and it takes different forms. A Marxist might say that intellectual specialization was simply one form of the increasing division of labour that was driven by the process of industrialization. With more precision, the social historian Harold Perkin, who also played a role as the secretary of his local branch of the Association of University Teachers, wrote about the rise of professional

society in which the knowledge of accountants, for instance, surveyors and engineers achieved higher status thanks to the formation of professional associations that examined new recruits to the profession and awarded certificates of competence. As Perkin put it, 'All professions use strategies of closure to segregate themselves from the laity and from one another' (1989: 395).

The bottom-up approach of Perkins might be complemented by a top-down approach that emphasizes the appeal of specialization to employers and in the academic domain to the rectors, vice-chancellors or presidents of universities, in the name of increased efficiency. If sympathetic to this approach, sociologists might invoke the ideas of Max Weber on rationality and bureaucracy; if unsympathetic, they might quote Thorstein Veblen (1918: 78) to the effect that 'the men of affairs have taken over the direction of the pursuit of knowledge', or even speak of the 'McDonaldization' of learning. [12],[#N12]. Since vice-chancellors and presidents often view themselves as engaged in a race in which it is essential for their institution to overtake its rivals, we return to the idea of competition between universities and to the imperialism of disciplines.

Before either Bourdieu or Elias had published their reflections on 'homo casemicus' or 'scientific establishments, an article by the Israeli sociologists Joseph Ben-David and Awraham Zloczower (1962: 45–84, especially 48–51) had already discussed the 'pioneering period' of the German universities in the nineteenth century, 'marked by the rapid development of the different academic fields and their differentiation into systematic and specific disciplines'. To explain this process the authors emphasized the point that in Germany at this time, each discipline in a given university was allocated only one chair, occupied by the head of the relevant institute. 'Whenever the demand for professors in a certain field was saturated', would-be professors strove to establish new disciplines.

This ingenious explanation is open to criticism, in the first place for ignoring the sense of mission that drives some pioneer scholars and reducing ideals to interests, and in the second place because, even if it explains the striving, it does not explain the success. On what conditions are demands for new disciplines recognized in different academic environments?

It is also necessary to distinguish different kinds of competition, for funds, for status, and so on, not only between individuals (stimulated by the possibility of obtaining prestigious awards such as Nobel Prizes), but also between small groups, departments, universities (especially in decentralized systems such as the German and the North American ones) or, as we have seen, nations.

Remembering that Elias once wrote in quasi-Darwinian language of the academic world as 'animated by a continuous competitive struggle for preservation' (2009: 137), we might pursue the ecological metaphor and think in terms of intellectual niches. Certain institutions, whether universities or institutes, may be viewed as niches constructed to support a particular approach, such as interdisciplinary studies in the case of the University of Sussex when it was founded in 1961), or, at the micro-level, the Institute of Development Studies or the Science Policy Research Unit in the same university. The university offered a supportive environment for the institutes, but the institutes illustrated and publicized the approach dominant in the university, so that the larger and the smaller units in a sense helped each other to survive in a competitive academic world.

Turning from the careers of individuals to the disciplines whose banners they bear, we might ask whether competition leads to innovation, to product differentiation in the intellectual domain, or whether innovation is likely to happen anyway (one idea or discovery leading naturally to another). In any case, competition often leads to establishment of new disciplines because novelty is, under certain conditions, an asset, in the case of departments as well as in the case of ideas and information.

In 1913, George Macaulay Trevelyan, reflecting on the institutionalization of the study of history in his time, compared movements of students and scholars from one discipline to another to movements of immigrants,

suggesting that the new history departments of his day 'are to the world of older learning what Western Canada is to England today' (1913: 141). Trevelyan's remark suggests that the history of disciplines might be rewritten with the help of the famous 'frontier thesis' of the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, first put forward in 1893, according to which the frontier is the locus of freedom and innovation, gradually replaced by their opposites as settlements are established and the frontier moves further west. [13].[#N13]

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Biography

Peter Burke studied at Oxford, taught at the University of Sussex when it was new (1962–78) and then moved to Cambridge, where he was Professor of Cultural history until his retirement and where he remains a Fellow of Emmanuel College. He is the author of *Sociology and History* (1980), expanded and revised as *History and Social Theory*, as well as studies of the Renaissance, Popular Culture, the use of images as historical sources and the social history of knowledge.

Notes

1. I should like to thank Stephen Mennell for his comments on the first draft of this paper. [↗\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. I tried to do this in the case of Ernest Gellner on knowledge and of Norbert Elias on language: see Burke (1996; 2005). [↗\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. Henceforward reference will be made to the *Collected Works* wherever appropriate. The relevance of other studies by Elias to the sociology of knowledge is stressed in Stephen Mennell and Johan Goudsblom (eds.) *Norbert Elias on Civilization, Power and Knowledge* (1998: 217–90). [↗\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. Elias linked Mannheim's emphasis on competition to the fact that Mannheim himself was an extremely competitive individual: Norbert Elias, *Über sich selbst* (1990: 138ff: English trans., *Reflections on a Life*, 1994: 109ff.). [↗\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. Elias made a similar point to Bourdieu (Elias, 2009: 94 – but cf 142). [↗\[#N5-pt1\]](#)
6. Elias figures in Shapin's bibliography, but not in the text. [↗\[#N6-pt1\]](#)
7. Elias occasionally used Bourdieu's phrase 'social capital', while he particularly admired Foucault's writings on sexuality. My thanks to Stephen Mennell for this information. [↗\[#N7-pt1\]](#)

8. Elias criticized the work of Gaston Bachelard for similar reasons: *Collected Works*, 14, 93n. [\[#N8-pt1\]](#)
9. Bourdieu develops his ideas on 'the field' in his *Homo Academicus* (1984). [\[#N9-pt1\]](#)
10. I owe this point to Stephen Mennell. [\[#N10-pt1\]](#)
11. Elias made occasional references to specialization and fragmentation: see Elias, 2009: 66–7, 75, 126, 141. The majority of the examples that follow are taken from my forthcoming book, *A Social History of Knowledge II: from the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (2011) but they are used here in a different framework. [\[#N11-pt1\]](#)
12. It is a pity that George Ritzer (1993) did not extend his investigation to the academic world, but the gap was filled by Dennis Hayes and Robin Wynyard (eds.) *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* (2002); one contributor refers to 'McKnowledge'. [\[#N12-pt1\]](#)
13. An alternative model for the crystallization of disciplines is the transition from sects to churches: Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge I: from Gutenberg to Diderot* (2000, ch. 3). [\[#N13-pt1\]](#)

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