

Editor's Introduction

Volume 2, Issue 1, February 2013

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0002.101> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0002.101>]

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This issue, the first of 2013 and the third consecutive edition of *Human Figurations*, takes Comte's invitation, contained in the hierarchy of human sciences, to heart. His call for an argument against *reductionism* was also mirrored by Elias's attempts to counteract the related trends of specialization, fragmentation and hodiocentrism. Conceived of in this spirit, *Human Figurations* aims to publish articles from a comparably wide variety of disciplines, as the range of the essays in this issue demonstrates. Our desire is to establish a permanent platform for discussions between writers studying all aspects of the human condition; 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, to counteract the dominant trend towards static and short-term approaches to the human condition. If measured against these criteria, the dynamic mix of contributors to this third issue overall indicates a modest degree of success in the early life of the journal.

Readers will, no doubt, be delighted to see the inclusion of a concise and erudite piece by one of the world's eminent historians, Bruce Mazlish. In his most recent book, *The Uncertain Sciences*, Mazlish explores questions about what kind of knowledge the human sciences, including history, can claim to offer: is such knowledge 'scientific' and what do we mean by scientific in this context? Here, he focuses more specifically on some aspects of the advancement of humanity, a phrase and intellectual approach, he suggests, is better in heuristic terms than Darwin's *The Ascent of Man*. For Mazlish, the process by which *homo sapiens* became aware that he was human, and what that entailed, is an ongoing process. Accordingly, Mazlish charts the various perspectives that can be used to tell this story: the rise of civilizations and the related emergence of written languages, agricultural settlements including the domestication of fire, and urban centres. Applying a less ideological view of progress, he argues that, if we look at science and technology, there is evidence of progress in the sense of humans gaining greater control over their environment, thereby facilitating greater scientific understanding and progress in other spheres such as art and literature. This is not to deny the existence of counter arguments against notions of civilizations, notable amongst them Rousseau. Without delving too deeply into these contentious areas, Mazlish makes the case that progress has also occurred in the moral sphere, examples of which include the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, increasing women's rights as part of wider struggle for human rights. Notable amongst this was the declaration of war crimes following the Nuremberg Trials as part of the general indictment concerning crimes against humanity. Whilst not persuaded by Pinker's approach to the long-term decline in violence, Mazlish does not dispute the fact that war among the major European powers is now more or less inconceivable. In short, taking the spirit of Elias, Mazlish proposes a relatively brief, but pointed argument for the need to study long-term global processes and impending challenges in what he calls 'Elias-like terms': challenges that, for him, transcend national boundaries and require international and global solutions.

One of these global challenges is the long-term process of capitalist rationalization and the process of water commodification. José Esteban Castro explores this process in the light of Elias's concept of the triad of basic controls. Following on from Mazlish's examination of humanity, this concept enables us to examine the ways in which humans have, over the course of human history, established controls over the non-human world and

on inter-and intra-human relationships. Castro argues that the historical processes of the valuation and commodification of water, and of any other elements of the natural world, offer a rich source of empirical examples for developing a better understanding of the underlying causes of some of the most 'acute social problems' facing human society in the twentieth-first century. These include the protracted and worsening long-term patterns of structural inequality associated with the government and the management and allocation of the world's freshwater affecting a very large proportion of humankind. The main thrust of this argument is that the often-repeated notion that water has already become a commodity would have relatively weak empirical correspondence on a global scale. This is the case, he contends, because although relentless, the unfolding processes of capitalist rationalization involving particular forms of water valuation and commodification are highly fragmented, patchy, and rather embryonic when compared against the advances made for instance by the commodification of other 'natural resources' including not least the human body. In the course of history humans have become ever more dependent on freshwater, not just for drinking but also, among other crucial activities, to produce food, to generate energy for industrial uses, or to provide essential water-based sanitation services. By exploring the internal tensions and contradictions of capitalist rationalization, and its interplay with alternative rationalities that characterise water-related human interactions, Castro demonstrates that if a conceptually restricted concept of commodification is applied, then we can conclude that most water in the planet remains un-commodified owing to the slow and fragmentary character of the capitalist rationalization process in water-related human interactions. In fact, examining the empirical field of water-related human interactions in their different dimensions, from the small scale activities of water gathering in remote rural areas to the management of vast water volumes in the ever more numerous megacities of the world, it is possible to observe an intricate web of rational and irrational elements that often become manifest even in the most pretentious scientific theories and explanations. Ancient myths, beliefs, principles, and practices developed in the course of human history can be found closely knitted with modern day fantasies, doctrines, and nostrums about water both as a natural element and in relation to its many functions for the biosphere and for humans in particular. Some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning the prevailing institutions, principles and practices of water government, management, and use worldwide are informed, Castro argues, as much by rational science as they are by beliefs, mythical thinking, doctrinarian assertions, and short-term interests.

International social relations, whether they be oriented towards the rationalization of water and other scarce resources, or reflected in explanations of the relations between states and the related academic discipline of analysing other phenomena insofar as they influence international political dynamics (cf., previous issue of *Human Figurations*), give rise to large normative questions about social ideals and purposes, matters that Comte might not have predicted nor which Elias discussed given their association with philosophy rather than rigorous social explanation. Here, Charles Jones takes up the mantle of examining civilization, American civilization specifically, from the perspective of recognizing particular styles of interaction and distinctive responses to the challenge of cultural difference within confined spaces. He argues that even those who accept Huntington's concept of civilization may take exception to his choice of frontiers. One serious charge is that Huntington misrepresented what kind of 'thing' civilization is and, consequently, what civilizational boundaries represent. The argument advanced here by Jones is that there is no single Western civilization or, if there is, that it has a fault line separating Western Europe from the Western hemisphere that is every bit as real (or not) as the line that separates Western Europe from Orthodox Christendom, a line dating back to the division of the Roman Empire in 395CE. There is an American civilization, he suggests, but it embraces the whole hemisphere and, if viewed from Mars, might most succinctly be defined as a distinctive project of modernity consisting in the attempt to develop liberal republics in acutely racialized societies. Jones's purpose, then, has been to expose the difficulty of a territorial or containment approach to civilization and to clear the way for the adoption of a relational view, grounded in a critique of the modernist concept of

territoriality too often assumed in the debate about clashing civilizations. More than outcomes, civilization is, for Jones, a shared project and it is the typical range of paths by which its realization is attempted that provides the cultural glue of each distinct civilization.

The three remaining contributors take a more European focus. Here I accept the risk that this description might be construed as a narrow representation of the implications of their work, not least because of the breadth of Elias's intellectual and sociological project as exemplified in the final contribution of Jason Hughes. But, first, allow me to refer to the more explicit European contributions, at least in terms of their empirical bases. Prior to his retirement from the University of Graz, Helmut Kuzmics exposes for us the feelings related to war and the feelings of those involved in it. Scarcely a researched topic, Kuzmics charts a historical sociology of the emotions and habitus of officers in the Hapsburg Army from 1848 to 1918. He describes this as a habitus that evolved which combined bluntness, discipline of the barracks and feudal 'courage', but which was also opposed to 'knowledge' and unable to develop qualities of good 'leadership' in battle. In this regard, determination and boldness often gave way to passivity, faltering and dithering in the face of battle. Whilst the causes of this are not easy to identify, Kuzmics brings some fruitful light to this matter by analyzing novels and other forms of prose fiction (Torresani, von Saar, Roth, Schnitzler, Lernet-Holenia etc.) to make visible the emotional experience and the situational constraints of Habsburg officers in their development from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the First World War. On a par, perhaps, with Elias's focus on handkerchiefs described by Hughes as a combination of ambition and humility (see, Hughes), Kuzmics illustrates that works of fiction are just as important for that they include and exclude. And, in historical-sociological narratives there is little mention of mentalities or social (or national) habitus. In this regard, Kuzmics' work illustrates the symbiotic relationship between the roles of theoretician and researcher. He demonstrates that fictional and non-fiction sources complement one another, correct one another reciprocally and, together, they help in reaching sociologically useful explanations for difficult problems. For their interpretation there is also the need for theoretical syntheses by means of which we can classify the often complex observations from literature and contemporary witnesses. In these, the emotions and the flow of their expression occur in a 'habitus'.

Taking a contemporary topic – austerity and the Eurozone – but with a necessary and fruitful historical sensitivity, Matt Clement considers the manufacturing of austerity as one outcome of the dynamic interplay of the economic forces of Anglo-America and Germany-Europa who find themselves at loggerheads, as he puts it, about how to keep European economies afloat. The call for a more interventionist European Central Bank (ECB) is contrasted by him with the approach enshrined in the German constitution, and which demands that political leaders govern more collectively, often by sharing responsibilities. The *Bundesbank* considers itself constitutionally bound to prevent the ECB gaining too much power through intervention in the Eurozone financial crisis while the Central Bank's caution is a product of the cataclysmic consequences of 1920s *Weimar* Germany. Clement argues that, in some ways, the *anomie* experienced by Weimar Germany mirrors the dilemma of today's so-called 'peripheral' European nations. They face similarly unrealistic strains imposed upon their living conditions as a result of the negative views held by international financial markets about their economies. Writing in 1921, the young Elias celebrated the spirit of innovation and possibility that surrounded him in Germany, describing how humanity can civilise itself and collectively raise its consciousness through active self-education. However, as Clement argues, Elias also distanced himself from the Marxism of his time but would have understood that the sheer intensity of pre-war Germany – which made it in many ways both the best and the worst of times – threw people into a vortex of conflicting political positions. Germany has often been singled out as a nation for its differences with its Western European rivals, France and Britain. The idea of the *sonderweg* or 'special path' by which Germany evolved into nationhood and capitalism has been acclaimed and denounced by various philosophers, sociologists and state officials, never more than during Elias' lifetime. And, here, Clements illustrates that as the early twenty-first century

ideal of a European federation of equals has given way to the Eurozone crisis, the focus has shifted to the power differentials between states. In this regard, Germany's centrality and economic dominance across the continent is a sign of the combined and uneven development affecting 'peripheral' nations whose relative industrial underdevelopment is generating a vicious cycle of austerity and social breakdown.

Last, but certainly not least, Jason Hughes proposes, tentatively, the habits of good sociology within the context the sociological practice developed in Elias's work. These habits, he suggests, should be taken as part of a series of polemical observations of particular tendencies, rather than discrete (and complete) empirical generalisations. He argues, convincingly in parts, that it is Elias's model of the sociological endeavour – one in which considerable sociological ambition is combined with empirical humility (e.g. that handkerchiefs might be as important as, say, economic relationships) – that remains an important (and perhaps under acknowledged) component of his intellectual legacy. Hughes exemplifies this through the selection and exploration of three key 'habits', these being empirical legitimacy, political alignment and relativistic egalitarianism. In the first, Hughes makes the case, expertly, for the importance of apparently mundane items, habits and places, such as observations of cafés, smoking, coffee, cups and spoons, to the sociological ambition. This is inspired by the ways in which Elias's work has historically displayed an obstinate tendency to run counter to intellectual fashions, and more generally to transgress dominant codes of sociological etiquette. The second, political alignment, is exemplified, amongst other things, in the return of 'the visual' from a previous state of denigration. Put simply by Hughes, the historical tendency towards hesitation or even self-censorship concerning, for example, the inclusion of photographs in sociological work can be understood to be related, in part, to a prevailing unease regarding the 'power effects' of particular kinds of images. Accompanying this is a more general hesitance among sociologists to transgress a dominant political code – that 'we' as sociologists should always distance ourselves from the interests and technologies of 'power'. The third, relativistic egalitarianism, is a sentiment that finds expression, for him, in the promotion of liberal theoretical pluralism over paradigmatic conciliation; eclecticism over synthesis; and specialisation over the development of a common sociological enterprise. It also involves the implicit stipulation that no single perspective or orientation should be elevated or 'privileged' over and above any other, and which underpins calls for intellectual modesty and a diffidence towards building any kind of central corpus of sociological knowledge. This sentiment is perhaps the most significant for the future prospects of Elias's sociology, and for the development of the discipline more generally. Why? For the idea of positing a 'central theory' smacks immediately of something unpalatable to many sociologists: it smacks of paradigm 'conquest', a charge that has been made against Elias's work given its high level of synthesis amongst other things. Taking a cautiously optimistic approach then, Hughes argues for the positioning of Elias's work as a fruitful model for doing sociology rather than as the foundation for all sociology. Elias's approach offers a model of sociological practice that, for Hughes at least, might permit 'advances' in sociological knowledge to take place.

I conclude this editorial by offering my sincerest thanks to readers of the journal. Your support at this early stage is crucial to the fulfillment of its longer-term success and aspirations. The Norbert Elias Foundation is also committed to the ongoing development of *Human Figurations*. On their behalf, and on behalf of the editorial board and administrative team, I thank the contributors to this first issue of 2013. I am certain that, having read and taken time to digest the sometimes challenging ideas discussed here, readers will have learned much about the journey towards, and the project of, establishing an overarching and interdisciplinary framework for the study of humanity. For as Cicero remarked, 'Who knows only his own generation remains always a child'.

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644