Editor's Introduction: 'The most important thinker that you have never heard of'?

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This issue will be a particularly stimulating one for the reader. It is a *tour de force* in terms of the calibre of some contributors who are leaders in their respective fields – Steven Pinker in psychology, Banton in racial/ethnic relations and Kilminster on fundamental issues in sociological theorising and the borderlines with philosophy, evolutionary biology and psychoanalysis– but it also features scholarly writers who tackle deep topics (Loyal and Quilley wrestle with Wittgenstein and Gellner). There are also interviews with Norbert Elias conducted in the 1980s, and offering insights into his development as 'the most important thinker that you have never heard of' (Pinker 2011: 59).

At the time of preparing this issue for release, world events include the hosting of the G8 summit in a much heralded and so-called post-conflict Northern Ireland while the Friends of Syria group have agreed to provide urgent support to rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad. Meantime, riot police in Turkey have used water cannons to break up thousands of protesters in Istanbul's Taksim Square, the latter being initially sparked into action by the eviction of a sit-in protesting the demolition of Istanbul's Gezi Park but subsequently widening their concerns to freedom of expression, assembly and the freedom of the press. And, in the vein of a 'mock battle', the British and Irish Lions have claimed the first match of the 2013 test series against Australia.

On the face of it, these events have little in common. Yet closer examination reveals tension-bound issues around identity and group relations, if not actual conflict, featuring, amongst other things, dominant-subordinate relations between groups. [1][#N1] We also see facets of stigmatising projects of more powerful groups and resistance by less powerful outsiders. Likewise, we can identify changes in the social composition of social groupings when bonding and bridging dynamics of social capital are activated. In fact, concerns are often raised about the existence or disappearance of cultures, themselves revealing aspects of the moral relativism underlying the contemporary politics of multiculturalism. No doubt the more informed reader will recognise the sensitising influence of figurational sociology on the identification of this common ground among apparently unrelated events. But, whether initiated into *Human Figurations* and the spirit of Elias or not, readers of this issue will, it is hoped, appreciate the extent to which the contributors have sought to push the boundaries of sociology, anthropology, urban studies, philosophy and evolutionary psychology through original examinations of seemingly disparate topics: the governance of behavior; majority sentiment; Gellner's compelling critique of Wittgenstein; approaches to critique and critical theory in sociology; and civilising offensives in modern societies.

Michael Banton's extensive experience as Professor of Sociology teaching social anthropology, and being Chair of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, has lead him to consider the sentiment that differentiates the majority, including the ways in which membership of this group was viewed as a default condition, and not necessarily a distinctive social position. Setting up the discussion, he argues, firstly, that majority-minority relations are different on the two sides of the Atlantic where, in the U.S. for example, there is a distinctive immigrant conception of their national society with relatively little attention paid to its first nations. Building on this, Banton then reappraises Elias and Scotson's established-outsider

framework from the perspective of asking questions about the evidence supporting certain statements e.g. where people allowed themselves to be ranked lower than others because they could not prevent it, and how acquaintance converted into cohesion, thereby reinforcing power, for the established group. Taking a detour via Putnam and social capital (including bonding and bridging capital), Banton then focuses on majority sentiment and the ways in which it can be traced to a sense of community as opposed to association, and not just seen as a mirror image of minority sentiment (the latter being a limitation of Elias and Scotson's original study, perhaps). This is another more informative way, he suggests, of grasping what Elias and Scotson (1965/2008) meant when they referred to a difference in social cohesion. The central thrust of Banton's argument is that majority sentiment is a product of community and not just association, taking different forms at different points in the scale, be that national or local. In this way, social distance expressed towards 'incomers' may be a way in which people affirm their identification with a community and not, to the degree implied by Elias and Scotson, a stigmatisation of them as of lesser worth.

Ryan Powell also takes up some aspects of relations between dominant and subordinate groups by focusing on the neglect of the Dutch origins of the concept of civilising offensives in UK accounts of civilising projects. He charts the genealogy of the concept – it being first coined to refer to efforts to improve the lot of working classes in Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century and refined subsequently, in the Dutch context, to show, for example, how the moral improvement of lower classes was tied to promotion of a national identity – and, in so doing, suggests ways in which it can be refined and developed as a tool for exposing the targeted and stigmatising projects of powerful groups. Within this, Powell draws attention to the importance of internal pressures, group and peer socialisation in group conflict at various levels, notably historical governmental projects. For him, civilising offensives include deliberate and less deliberate (or unplanned) dimensions of attempts by elite groups to steer 'civilisation' in a particular direction. Another aspect is the aforementioned stigmatising dynamics evident in Banton's analysis. It may well be the case that civilising offensives, which are far more short-term than Elias's observations, have little impact on the overall direction of civilising processes indicated in the latter's work. That point having been made, Powell notes that there are clear consequences of civilising missions (however short- or longer-term), particularly for more subordinate groups. He draws on four policy domains to make this point: social welfare; responses to 'outsider groups'; Scottish sectarianism; and climate change while three potential areas for further research are also discussed. Powell's paper makes the case that civilising offensives should be considered as particular *phases* of the overall civilising process, phases in which group conflicts and contestations over culture between established and outsider groups are heightened and more clearly discernible.

Following the theme of the political life of modernising societies, Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley present what is, perhaps, the first paper (in English) to discuss what they term the hoary problem of relativism in the social sciences and the related choice between regressive and progressive visions of community and society. Working backwards from the 'Habsburg dilemma', they examine Wittgenstein, Winch, Gellner and Malinowski's influential ideas at length. In so doing, they argue that Gellner's response to Wittgenstein is subject to process reduction and fails to overcome conceptual dogmas of truth/falsity and objectivity/subjectivity. In fact, by adopting an approach of two halves – the first on relativism in the social sciences, thought styles and the problem of knowledge, and the second on the problem with Gellner, the merits of the later Malinowski and processes of involvement and detachment – they move beyond them convincingly in the direction of a longer term orientation by supplanting the emphasis of knowledge as an individual achievement or attribute with an insistence on knowledge as a social process.

Without throwing the baby out with the bathwater, Loyal and Quilley identify a number of convergences between Wittgenstein and Elias in their approaches both to language and to understanding the social world more generally. These are: the natural basis of language and the social nature of humans; the social

acquisition of knowledge and the dovetailed continuity between natural and social dimensions of human life; the rejection of Cartesian individualism; and, the recognition of intergenerational transmission of knowledge. However, Wittgenstein thinks only in dyadic terms and never develops the ides of successive intergenerational transmission of a social stock of knowledge. For Loyal and Quilley, we have in Elias and the later Malinowski a formulation that allows for a slow but steady improvement in the collective capacity to view social processes from the outside. They argue that the more external our vantage point, and the longer our time horizons, the greater chance we shall have of navigating seemingly intractable problems of environmental sustainability, geo-political conflict, 'clashes of civilisations' and communal violence.

Kilminster takes matters back to their disciplinary roots in his elucidation of critique and overcritique in sociology. The word 'critical', as one of a family of words including critique, critiquing and criticism, is ubiquitous at the present time in sociological writings and in the milieus of teaching, research, publishing and abstracts of conference papers. At the same time, the obligatory adjective critical has developed an almost incantatory, magical aura, although it is often used carelessly. However, despite the fact that the term critical has become desperately equivocal in contemporary usage, sociologists and others in the social sciences continue *self-consciously* to commit themselves to a sociology that is avowedly 'critical'. In this way, it has become a perspective that systematically interprets the affirmation of anything that is good about society and worth preserving as ideologically suspect and serving the interests of the privileged.

Kilminster's argument is that, today, unalloyed overcritique is destructive because against an idealised model of the unrealised society of pure freedom, equality, collective labour and direct democracy, the present social reality must always be found severely wanting in virtually every respect. The result is the relentless, gloomy and often melodramatic depiction of modern society as wholly noxious and oppressive. He explores the deeper presuppositions of the style of 'critical' thinking lying behind various overstatements and similar ones in the recent writings of the prolific social philosopher, Zygmunt Bauman, whose sweeping indictment of contemporary society provides another sophisticated example of the problem. In so doing, he clears much needed ground around the technical meanings of the term 'critical' in philosophy and sociology, which are tacitly implicated in much of modern sociology. Bauman's approach illustrates, for Kilminster's purposes, the anatomy of overcritique and, more broadly, the pitfalls of the metaphysical and transcendental hangovers still persisting in sociology because he (Bauman) one-sidedly undervalues the present society as producing and reproducing nothing but unrelieved anxiety and uncertainty. There is, for Kilminster, in Bauman's later writings little or no direct corroborative empirical data about modern societies deployed or discussed, something that runs counter to the central principle in the culture of social science since the Enlightenment. There is, for example, an empirical issue about exactly *how far* contemporary consumer societies are now '*unstructured*', which is a central assertion in Bauman's diagnosis as well as questions of the interplay of theory and empirical verification. And, it is within this theme – the interplay of theory and empirical verification – that Steven Pinker (2011) 'has arguably surpassed Elias with the very substantial body of statistical data that he introduces' (Dunning and Hughes 2013: 43).

In the previous issue of *Human Figurations* (February 2013), Bruce Mazlish was not persuaded by the approach of distinguished Canadian social psychologist Steven Pinker to the long-term decline in violence. That said,Mazlish did not dispute the fact that war among the major European powers is now more or less inconceivable. Pinker, who teaches at Harvard, cites Elias very extensively in his acclaimed and widely reviewed new book, *The Better Angels of our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and Its Causes* (New York: Viking, 2011), this being one of the first major books to emanate from the USA that makes Elias's work central to its thesis. Indeed, as was noted above, Pinker refers to Elias as 'the most important' thinker you have never heard of' (2011: 59). Whilst an almost chance comment at face value, the view of several of those who have reviewed his book in newspapers is one of surprise at the thesis that human beings have gradually

become less, not more, violent over the course of long-term social development. What has the status of conventional wisdom among many historians, criminologists and International Relations scholars still comes as a shock to many general readers. And this may very well be the case for *Human Figurations* readers who may find themselves puzzled by Pinker's very persuasive case that violence and war have been declining in a significant way over the centuries. We are indebted to the author and his publisher (Penguin Books) for agreeing to the reprint of an excerpt from chapter three, 'The Civilizing Process'. Crediting a plummeting rate of homicide for the seed that grew into his book, Pinker 'borrowed the title of the chapter from Elias because he was the only major social thinker with a theory that could explain it' (2011: 73). In the excerpt reprinted here, Pinker provides a brilliant example of a de-civilising process in his empirically validated elucidation of a thirty-year long period of increasing violence documented as having occurred in the USA and Western Europe in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The issue concludes with four interviews with Norbert Elias, previously unpublished in this format. We are grateful here to the Board of Trustees of the Norbert Elias Foundation for their authorisation. Edmund Jephcott and Robert van Krieken also graciously permitted the inclusion of their translations of some of these interviews in this issue. The four interviews are published here in chronological order and entitled 'An Interview in Bloomington, Indiana' (1982), 'We still haven't learnt to control nature and ourselves enough' (1984), 'We should not let ourselves be misled' (1987) and 'In reality, we are all late barbarians' (1989). Three of the interviews were originally published in mainstream periodicals – the Dutch weekly paper *De Groene Amsterdammer,* and two German newspapers, the daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and the weekly *Die Welt* – and thus are dominated by discussions of current affairs. The fourth was conducted by the American political scientist Gregor Hahn, and was presented to a largely academic readership in the *West European Center Newsletter* (now entitled *West European Studies*).

In their preceding commentary to the interviews, Jason Hughes and John Goodwin suggest that these interviews hold value not simply in terms of the responses Elias provides, but also in their presentation of different intellectual 'sketches' or 'drawings' of Elias in relation to the pressing social, cultural and political concerns of the day. This manner of treating interviews as 'relational clues' stems from Hughes and Goodwin's approach to embedding documentary analysis in human figurations. Here they explore 'the drawing of Elias' in two key senses. First, they explore how the interviewers sought in different ways to 'draw' Elias on questions relating to the political affairs of the day, and on the possible impact of specific aspects of his biography on his more general sociology. Secondly, they scrutinise how, partly through their questions and through the presentation of their material, interviewers in different ways presented a particular 'drawing' or rendering of Elias – a sketch of Elias the man, and Elias's sociological position in relation to a series of topics which were very much of their time. Hughes and Goodwin also speculate that Elias's notable resistance to be 'located' in this manner – after the fashion of intellectual historiography – might be based, in part, in his sociological critique of such approaches to understanding the development of knowledge and the sciences.

Amongst other things, the contributors to this issue sensitise us to the potentially problematic future of sociology, and indeed other disciplines, lying as it may on a continuum between a culture of testing and research on the one hand, and discussion and critique on the other. Pinker's intricate weaving together of psychology, history, science and popular culture bucks the latter trend and offers some degree of cautious optimism for paradigmatic conciliation at least, accepting that Elias's vision for sociology – greater scientific autonomy and paradigmatic resolution (Dunning and Hughes, 2013)– remains unfulfilled. If it serves to draw attention to innovations not only within but, importantly, across disciplines and to explore their implications for our cumulative understanding of the human condition, then this issue has fulfilled one of the stated objectives of *Human Figurations*. The launch of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias in 2014 at the University of Leicester – the totality of his life's work, as a person and human being, and as a sociologist – will

mark another opportunity to assess further the potential for the future development of high-level synthesis in social inquiry.

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Notes

1. For an insight into the dynamics of national identity tagging in the British and Irish Lions, see Bloyce, Liston, Platts and Smith (2010). ⬆ [#N1-ptr1]