Wittgenstein, Gellner, and Elias: From the Philosophy of Language Games to a Figurational Sociology of Knowledge.

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses the problem of relativism in the social sciences and the related notion that the political life of modernising societies necessarily presents a choice between regressive/Gemeinschaftlich and progressive/Gesellshaftlich visions of community and society – between Mannheim's 'liberal/natural law' and 'conservative thought styles.' Starting from Gellner's account of Wittgenstein and Malinowski as instantiations of this 'Hapsburg Dilemma', it is argued that the Gellner/(early) Malinowski solution of epistemological co-habitation is unsatisfactory. Linking the development of human knowledge to long term dynamics of social development, Elias's processual concept of involvement and detachment, conceived as a (highly) variable balance, allows social scientists to move beyond the dualities of 'thought styles'. Involvement and Detachment provides the foundation for a historical sociology of language games and a reinvigorated social science, understood as contributing to the cumulative expansion of the social stock of knowledge.*

KEYWORDS: *Wittgenstein, thought-styles, relativism, Gellner, involvement, detachment*

1. Introduction

> 'There are two fundamental theories of knowledge. These two theories stand in stark contrast to each other. They are profoundly opposed. They represent two poles of looking, not merely at knowledge but at human life. Aligned with these two polar views of knowledge there are also related, and similarly contrasted, theories of society, of man, of everything. [They are] ... the individualistic/atomistic conception ... [and the] organic vision' (Gellner, 1995: 1–5)
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> 'Every person, from the word go, enters a pre-existing knowledge stream ... [T]he characteristics of [the] social fund of knowledge [are linked] to the social levels of danger and fear and thus of security prevailing in a society ... [and] the relationship between the levels of danger and fear and the type of knowledge dominant in a particular field is not a simple causal relationship, but circular or spiral. Both levels of security on the one hand, and the involvement-detachment balance represented by people's knowledge and actions on the other, are, potentially or actually, in a condition of flux. They form part of a continuous process in one direction or another. What one might consider as a cause is also an effect, and what might be considered an effect may in turn be a cause (Elias 2007: 15, 27)

In the social sciences the hoary problem of relativism has become a catchall for a pervasive sense of ethical ambivalence and professional cynicism as to the utility of social *science* as a 'means of orientation'. But

relativism is not merely a problem of disciplinary integrity, but underlies a series of much broader political and policy problems. For instance, the moral relativism underlying the contemporary politics of multiculturalism, in undermining any attempt to articulate moral universals, has engendered the now familiar problem of the extent to which liberals should tolerate intolerance (Gellner 1974: 30; Lukes 2003: 27-46). Likewise the refusal to countenance the cognitive advances of science, and in a related problem the tendency to equate any recognition of sequential order in human social development with a Eurocentric teleology of 'progress', has resulted in a puerile anti-science commonsense that 'all science is ethno-science' (Barnard 2000: 99).

This dichotomy has been evident in the recent dominance of postmodernist and poststructuralist currents in sociological theorising. There have also been more thoughtful and intellectually rigorous strands deriving from hermeneutics, the philosophy of science and ordinary language philosophy (with some thinkers drawing upon all three). Here Wittgenstein's work as interpreted through Peter Winch has been especially influential (Winch 1958; Pleasants 1999; Hutchinson 2008). These relativist theories have also been adopted and advanced by a burgeoning and increasingly influential sociology of science.

Such hermeneutic relativism, though dominant in the rarefied atmosphere of 'theory' has been coexisting but rarely engaging with an equally reductive positivist orientation which emphasises the rational individual – rational choice theory, being the clearest example. Although there have been other attempts to move beyond the impasse of relativism – notably the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar, but with greater programmatic force the work of Pierre Bourdieu – Elias's approach, we suggest, offers the most productive way to move from a relativist position without lapsing into an individualistic rationalism. Sidestepping discussions tied to subjectivity and objectivity as well as problems concerning the individual versus the social nature of knowledge, Elias supplants the emphasis of knowledge as an individual achievement or attribute, with an insistence on knowledge as a social process. The framework of long-term social development draws attention to the role of intergenerational transmission in the expansion (and/or contraction) of the social stock of knowledge available to individuals and groups in any social or historical context. Finally this emphasis on process allows Elias to move away from the conception of truth/falsity, rationality/irrationality as 'things' – as static attributes of individuals (the reflex default point of departure for Western philosophy) or societies – and instead to focus on the variable *balance* between aspects of involvement and detachment present in all cognitive orientations. The processual notion of balance draws attention to the combination of both fantasy and reality-congruence in the stocks of knowledge and conceptual frameworks available to any individual and all social groups. Processes of both social development and child maturation can then be analysed in terms of such changing balances. Children, for instance, when playing move fluidly between 'make believe' or fantasy and 'the real world'. This balance is variable over the course of the day, in relation to social context (which friends happen to be around), over the course of years and months. But the relatively more detached 'truth content' of the realism in question is also dependent on the public standards of detachment operating within a specific society and the cognitive capacities of any particular child. As Elias points out in relation to the 'socio-genetic ground rule', one consequence of the process of civilisation is that the distance between child and adult cognitive frames of reference and affective controls has gradually lengthened (2000: 410).

In what follows we contrast Elias's approach to language and society with that of Wittgenstein, as an exemplar of relativism. Applying Mannheim's typology of cognitive frames to the contrasting epistemologies of the 'early' and 'later' Wittgenstein, we explore the problem of relativism in the social sciences as an apparently irreconcilable tension between liberal/natural law and conservative 'thought styles'. Taking up the vehement but compelling critique of Wittgenstein advanced over many years by Ernest Gellner, we argue that his own response to Wittgenstein is also subject to what Elias called 'process reduction', and fails to overcome the conceptual dogmas of 'truth' versus 'falsity' and objectivity versus subjectivity. In fact the relativism that

seems an inescapable correlate of the later Wittgenstein's often subtle and illuminating insights as to the relationship between language and social life – that the meaning of words and concepts hinges on their use – disappears when subjected to a sociological treatment focusing on the historical transformation of 'forms of life' and 'language communities'.

2. Relativism in the social sciences

Following Spiro (1992; see also Boudon 2003 and Aya 2004) it is useful to distinguish three types of relativism: descriptive, normative and epistemological. All anthropologists and historical sociologists are cultural determinists at least in the limited sense that cultures mediate and to some extent determine the ways in which humans perceive the world. It was Franz Boas who did most to establish weak, descriptive relativism as anthropological common sense. Although the title of his first book *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) might seem, for a contemporary 'multicultural sensibility', to have an anachronistic evolutionist overtone, it was in fact the first programmatic statement of the need to treat primitive societies on an equal footing with modern Western societies and to define 'primitive' in a non-racist, non-judgemental manner (Barnard, 2000: 99–102). One consequence of Boas's formulation was that it seemed impossible to establish a historical or developmental relationship between 'modern' and 'primitive' societies without embracing the moral and evaluative connotations of nineteenth century evolutionism. The resulting conceptual binary is premised upon the fiction that societies develop (if they develop at all) in isolation, as a result of internally generated dynamics. Eschewing humanity as a whole and the complex dynamics between social groups and 'forms of life', the resulting methodological imperative dictated that cultures should be studied as self-contained, incommensurable units. The principle of incommensurability prepared the ground for more radical normative and epistemological relativism.

Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Burma, Micronesia and an Israeli Kibbutz, Melford Spiro challenged the relativist sensibility in anthropology and did much to re-establish the importance of the comparative method for the identification of psychological and cultural universals (e.g. 1987) Spiro distinguishes between two strands of normative relativism: *cognitive relativism* which holds that all descriptive statements about the world are culturally contingent and therefore incommensurable; and *moral relativism* which concerns evaluative propositions, including all aesthetic and ethical judgements which are likewise held to be contingent on local, cultural conventions – precluding, by definition, any universally valid values. Boas in the United States and Evans-Pritchard in Britain were both committed to forms of cognitive relativism, but it was the work of Edward Sapir (1921) and his student and colleague Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) that became synonymous with the concept. During the 1970s social constructionism, particularly in the area of science studies and the philosophy of science, made cognitive relativism a piece of sociological common sense. Mary Douglas captured this mood referring to 'subjective truth' and an unavoidable 'cognitive precariousness' (1973. 1975, quoted in Hollis and Lukes 1982: 3). Elsewhere it was the psychological anthropology associated with the 'culture and personality' school of Ruth Benedict (1934), and subsequently Margaret Mead and Clyde Kluckhohn, that became most associated with a comprehensive moral relativism.

The confrontation between primitive and modern ensured that the problem of relativism became a persistent point of debate and controversy in anthropology. Writing at the same time as Boas, Benedict and Mead, Lévy-Bruhl drew a distinction between modern, scientific and primitive 'pre-logical' thought that became a target for ritual demolition by relativist detractors. Evans Pritchard's monograph on Azande witchcraft was one of the first and most influential contributions to this debate (1937). His work was subsequently used by Peter Winch (1958) to argue that it was impossible to establish testable knowledge about cultural phenomena since meaning was defined by usage in cultural context. Capturing the intellectual *Zeitgeist*, this book set off a long

interdisciplinary debate about the nature of rationality, which formed a backdrop to theoretical debates in sociology well into the 1980s (Wilson 1970; Hollis and Lukes 1982; Overing 1985).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, infused with the anti-foundationalist treatments of knowledge and meaning in Anglo American pragmatist and ordinary language philosophy, and with the rising post-modern and post-structuralist sensibility across the humanities, relativist currents in anthropology and sociology engendered a pervasive *epistemological relativism*. In Richard Rorty's famous formulation this amounted to a rejection of the whole project of epistemology, and an abandonment of any attempt to compare and evaluate different local forms of knowledge or conflicting propositions (1980: 317). Contributions from Quine, Dewey and Wittgenstein in philosophy were complemented by studies in the history and philosophy of science – most notably Kuhn (1962) and Feyerabend (1975).

It is perhaps unfair to lump together under the umbrella category of 'relativism' such a diversity of intellectual debates, occurring in a variety of disciplines, over a period of more than thirty years. Many contributions were sophisticated and thoughtful attempts to grapple with what were perceived to be real epistemological problems that severely undermined the practice of social science (Bernstein 1983). However the point of this vignette is to pave the way for a detailed examination of what we see to be the central problem. For decades the Marxist project of generating objective knowledge about the social world was tied too closely to teleological philosophy of history and a self-consciously 'involved' attachment to class politics. The failure of that political project has contributed to the widespread rejection among sociologists of the possibility of a *science* of social processes. It was in this context that a preoccupation with meaning and interpretation came to replace the idea of causal explanation. [1] [#N1]

During this period the later Wittgenstein became a popular citation among philosophically literate sociologists. Peter Winch's book (1958) popularised the Wittgensteinian perspective, making it available to sociologists and becoming a permanent fixture in debates around the philosophy of social science. And this route has certainly provided the most intellectually sophisticated and illuminating route to a relativistic social science, even if it is, as we will argue, ultimately wrong-headed and self-defeating. In popular rendition, the Wittgensteinian insight at the heart of the 'linguistic turn' was that the meaning of language was defined in context and through use – in relation to specific 'language games' associated with discrete 'forms of life'. Although Wittgenstein never referred to particular historical or social contexts, for social scientists 'forms of life' were equated with *Gemeinschaft* and language games with the embodied local knowledge of discrete communities. The epistemological lesson – that 'we are all trapped inside our language games' – ruled out the possibility of sociology generating objective knowledge of the social world. Not to mention leaving out the question of who this 'we' was referring to.

This brief historiography underlines the extent to which mainstream social science disciplines became transfixed by the fear that even the idea of psychological or cultural universals would open the door to sweeping judgements and ethico-moral domination of marginal groups and societies. But by abandoning explanation in favour of interpretation, large areas of sociology and anthropology have become irrelevant and unable even to engage with fast developing areas of cognitive neuroscience and developmental biology (e.g. Harmon-Jones and Winkielman 2007). In what follows, it is argued that a figurational approach to the sociology of knowledge is a prerequisite for the reestablishment of sociology and social anthropology, alongside genetic, developmental and cognitive disciplines, as equal partners in the interdisciplinary 'science of humanity'.

3. Mannheim and Thought Styles

Mannheim's discussion of thought styles, within the context of his sociology of knowledge, provides a useful typology of the habitual cognitive frames underlying most social and political thought (1986). In his discussion of conservatism Mannheim distinguishes between bourgeois liberalism with its 'natural-law' style of thought and a countervailing conservative thought style that arose in its wake. [2] [#N2]

> Conservative thought emerged as a distinguishable entity and dynamic structural configuration when it placed itself into conscious opposition to the bourgeois-revolutionary style of thought, *to the natural-law mode of thinking*. By finding itself faced with a systematic opponent, the thought impulse which had been more or less latent gained a theoretically comprehensible point of crystallisation. It eventually became necessary to raise up an emerging 'counter-system' against this system. (1986: 102–3)

In consequence, 'conservative thought' takes its form and character from 'natural law' thought. Its ideals are the negation of the bourgeois-liberal ideals, reluctantly offered by participants in a form of life legitimated by unspoken and inarticulate tradition.

Uncomfortable with the universalism and abstraction of ideas per se, conservative romanticism has to be goaded into articulation. Conservatism is concrete and holistic in response to the abstraction and atomism of natural law. Both thought-styles, and their social carriers – the rising bourgeoisie and the conservative reaction – are concrete historical phenomena discernible in the culture of West European societies from the first half of the nineteenth century. Manheim's distinction between liberal and conservative thought styles provides an important sensitising device which allows us to see the structure of theoretical framework – the ways in which the ideas are related to one another – and the political unconscious that underpins them and accounts for their presence. It therefore helps to illuminate the limitations of the framework. Of course not all theories fit easily within this binary schema and some, such as a network approach for example, embody aspects of both thought-styles. But in the specific case we are dealing with Wittgenstein and relativism – Mannheim's conceptual distinction is especially useful.

4. Wittgenstein and the problem of knowledge

Although he writes lucidly and even poetically, Wittgenstein's exposition is elliptical and deliberately obscure – not least since (in his later work) he self-consciously eschews the classical mode of argumentation, seeking instead to lead the reader into a way of working with and reflecting upon language. In our exposition we focus on his ideas, particularly as they have been received in the social sciences.

Wittgenstein's philosophy is conventionally characterised in terms of two radically different conceptions of the nature of language structured by two periods, an 'early' and a 'late' Wittgenstein. There are, however, as both Peter Winch and Rush Rhees have pointed out, also definite continuities between these periods.

The early work culminated in the *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* (published in 1921) in which language is conceived of as a picture of reality, with its function to represent the world to us. Subsequently, in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) Wittgenstein rejects the idea of language as a simple, logical and abstract mirror to the structure of the world. Language is seen to be a form of practice which can be contradictory and is instantiated in concrete situations and activities. No longer simply representational, it is functional with the emphasis on the use or words rather than their meanings.

> Think of tools in a box... The functions of words are as diverse as functions of these objects (1953: para 11).

But these functions need to be understood within the context of social conduct. Different words, like different tools, are used in very different ways. In this way Wittgenstein articulates an understanding of language as fundamentally performative. As Austin argued, language allows us ‘to do things with words’ (1975). Moreover, language does not simply represent an autonomous order in the human world structured according to a finite inner logic, but is an open-ended practice consisting of language games embodied in broader practices or forms of life.

> The speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life (1953: para. 23).

These often remain tacit and are a condition for language to operate. Failure to understand language as an activity, as part of things we do, leads to conceptual puzzlement and confusion.

> [Conceptual problems] arise when language goes on holiday; [they involve] confusions which occupy us...when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work (1953: para 132).

Thus, for Wittgenstein, meanings are context-bound and contingent on their use in situated human activities. Conceptual confusions arise from our habit of contemplating the ‘meaning’ of words in the abstract, speculatively and independently of the way they are fashioned in use. This problem is reinforced by a ‘craving for generality’ which is part of our nature as human-beings. We constantly seek to extend meaning and understanding, and to generate order and systematicity in our conceptual systems. For Wittgenstein this leads us to generalize in haste and in error. Specifically he is concerned with instances in which generalities are sought from one empirical example or a single image. It is in this context that he says:

> A picture held us captive for we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably ... (1953: para 115).

As well as highlighting the grammatical moves permissible in various language games, Wittgenstein is also interested in the way a person is initiated into his or her native language and culture. For how we learn language tells us much about what language is, what concepts are, how our minds operate and what it means to say that language is an open system. Here the child learns concepts, or comes to master language games not through explanation or ostension (‘pointing’) but by training. Training differs from explanation in at least two ways: it is relatively nonverbal, relying on gestures, facial expressions and the like; and it aims primarily at producing certain actions from the learner, quite apart from what goes on in his or her head. He tries to show that even the mastery of definitions, principles, generalities, depends ultimately on our natural human capacities and inclinations, which do not themselves have any further explanation. Such training must have a foundation in natural, pre-linguistic, human reactions. To be able to speak and to understand English one must have (either natural or artificial) sensory organs capable of making contrasts between words. [3] [#N3]

5. The continuing importance of Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's philosophy brilliantly emphasises the social nature of human language and conduct. It has the virtue of moving markedly away from the Cartesian individualism that characterises Western philosophy. The analysis of language games provides a counterweight to the traditional privileging of the inner mental dimensions of knowledge acquisition over the outer, relational and social dimensions. And referring to the 'natural history' of human beings (1953: para 25), Wittgenstein also emphasises the natural aspect of humans or what he calls the 'common behaviour of mankind' (1953: para 206).

Wittgenstein understands that language is not a mirror to reality but a social practice in its own right – and as a medium it has a materiality and 'thickness' independently of any object world. But it does not necessarily follow that our concepts wholly determine reality. Despite the parallels with the work of Sapir and Whorf, he is not a linguistic determinist who believes that our conceptual scheme determines our world. Rather, in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein attempts to hold a dialectical balance between the mutual influences of language and the world.

Moreover, in contrast to Derrida (1973, 1978, 1976) who also emphasizes the indeterminacy of meaning**,** Wittgenstein does not believe that interpretation entails an infinite regression. On the contrary, the word has force only in situations where there is genuine doubt over meaning in specific language games and forms of life**.** Language is a practice embedded in other practices or forms of life. As Giddens notes:

> Language is still seen to be intimately dependent on the non-linguistic, or what cannot be put into words, 'what cannot be said'. But what cannot be said is no longer a mysterious metaphysic that cannot be even talked about. What cannot be said is, on the contrary, prosaic and mundane. It is what has to be done: the meanings of linguistic items are intrinsically involved with the practices that comprise forms of life. This is a move of major significance, in my judgement, as compared to the orientation characteristic of structuralism, in which 'that which cannot be said' is characteristically identified with the unconscious or, in Derrida, with writing (1979: 34–5).

Wittgenstein provides a methodological prompt to ask the right kind of sociological questions concerning people and their everyday activities. He enables us to avoid what Bourdieu calls a 'scholastic standpoint' – that is looking at the work through the ideas of an actor who has a contemplative attitude to the world and who thereby overemphasises the symbolic meanings of people's actions (for example as an academic) (Bourdieu 2000).

Finally, Wittgenstein also inveighs against forms of conceptual essentialism focusing on the abstract meaning of words. Instead he points us to social relationships, and a processual focus on events and activities taking place in time and space. These he argues need to be understood in terms of family resemblances rather than sharing a singular underlying essence (Wittgenstein, 1962: 17).

There are a number of convergences between Wittgenstein and Elias in their approach both to language and to understanding the social world more generally. [4] [#N4] Like Wittgenstein, Elias highlights the natural basis of language (Elias 1989: 4), whilst emphasising the social nature of humans, and specifically the social acquisition knowledge (1989: 21). Both also recognise the 'dovetailed' continuity between the natural and social dimensions of human life (1989: 19); between 'natural reactions' and human conventions (Wittgenstein 1953: 185). Both reject the Cartesian individualism implicit in most theories of language, insisting instead on the psycho-physical unity of a plurality of person-organisms, communicating, sharing and learning by doing; 'learning a language and a world together' (Cavell 1969: 19). Likewise there is a shared recognition of intergenerational transmission, of the importance of past knowledge and tradition as the basis for future knowledge, and 'tacit knowledge' or habitus. And finally they also share an emphasis on the function of

language and what humans can *do* with it, in relation to problems of communication, orientation and coordination.

6. Wittgenstein and the 'conservative thought style'

The problem with the later Wittgenstein is that the abstract focus on language games is never linked to concrete historical and sociological processes in the 'real world'. The sealed communities evoked by his image of unbridgeable and internally consistent language games, although often politically seductive, are from any sociological or historical perspective, simply unrealistic. For all its abstraction and lack of reference to any specific social or historical reality, the later Wittgenstein can clearly be characterised in terms of Mannheim's 'conservative thought style'. Rather than referring to autonomous, sovereign individuals and arguing at a high level of abstraction and generality, such a frame makes reference to the social and collective nature of human existence and to empirical and contextual modes of evaluation. The emphasis is on life over reason, practice over norms, and being over thought (Bloor 1983: 162). The conservative thought style is also strikingly evident in both Goethe and Spengler, upon whom Wittgenstein draws heavily.

Although a conservative thought-style provides a valuable resource for conceptualising and re-evaluating human activity and understanding social life, the conservative approach is just as flawed as the traditional Enlightenment epistemology it claims to have transcended, since it frequently relies upon the same framework of evaluative oppositions. It is becoming fashionable now to favour the concrete over the general, subjectivity over science, feeling and action over rational comprehension. But the fashion merely accepts the old polarities and reinforces them, choosing the opposite pole. Thus some conservative thought-styles have aligned themselves too strongly with anti-theoretical tendencies, with a strident emphasis on particularity, with a thoroughgoing relativism, with an unreflective acceptance of tradition, with romanticism, and with ungrounded notions of hierarchy.

In his philosophy of language games Wittgenstein adopts an uncompromising particularism: what something means is depends entirely on context, on how it is used on a particular occasion. But ironically such an approach atomises culture just as disastrously as the natural law thought style against which it rails. This kind of reductionism is evident in Wittgenstein's avoidance of any form of theorising; in his desire to avoid 'pictures which hold us captive' by positing hypothetical entities which supposedly lie beneath the surface of social life.

> We may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place (1953: paragraph 109).

As explanation is replaced by description the injunction is to 'take things as given'.

Moreover, despite his insistence on the connection of words and the world, Wittgenstein remains an idealist. The idealist theme, the insistence that our language controls what can possibly occur in the world, seems to be one of the few deep threads of continuity between the *Tractatus* and the later work (Pitkin 1972). In the later philosophy Wittgenstein no longer says that 'objects' contain or govern the 'possibilities of all situations' but rather that grammar does so. Knowing the grammar of a word, we know what kinds of things are – can be – said with it, what would count as appropriate occasions for saying them. This is why 'philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by means of language' (1953: 109). The puzzlement ceases

when we achieve a perspicuous overview of the grammar. Wittgenstein treats the disease of conceptual puzzlement by varying our diet, by reminding us of the richness and plurality of our ordinary speech. In doing so he does not really tell us anything new; he 'assembles reminders' for us (1953: para 127). Here 'the problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known' (1953: para 109). What we really lack when we are conceptually puzzled is not a definition or rule, but a clear overview of the relevant cases. What Wittgenstein argues he has to offer is something like a new perspective, a new way of seeing what has always been visible, but what has gone unnoticed precisely because of its familiarity. The role of philosophy is not to offer explanations but descriptions or perhaps explanation through description.

To the extent that our concepts and our language are shaped by human nature and the natural human condition, they cannot be justified, and must be simply accepted as given. Beyond that we cannot explain those forms of life, nor give reasons for them. Wittgenstein says that explanations must have an end somewhere.

> If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do' (1953: para 217).

Ultimately something has to be accepted as given – not the 'truth's that we predicate of the world, not the concepts in which we express them, but the language games that shape the grammar of those concepts and the conditions that produce those language games.

> What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life (1953: para 226).

Thus although one form of life can replace another it cannot be criticised.

It is clear that, in Mannheim's terms, Wittgenstein's work is closer to the conservative than the natural-law style of thought. Such a correlation between Wittgenstein's work and the conservative attitude is of course not new (Bloor 1983; Nyiri 1998) though some have opposed it (Janek and Toulmin 1973; Pitkin 1972; Cavell 1988). As Nyiri argues:

> The well-known fact that in Wittgenstein's later philosophy there is a tendency to emphasize the genetic, or historical, aspect of individual mental occurrences, and to regard these as manifestations of social customs and institutions, would not, in itself, justify the attempt to establish a relationship between this philosophy, and certain currents of conservatism. Yet the specific tone of Wittgenstein's analyses, the content of many of his remarks and reflections, and the historical circumstances in which this philosophy came into being definitely invite an interpretation in the light of which there indeed emerge family resemblances between Wittgenstein on the one hand and some important representative of conservatism on the other (1998: 44).

The representatives Nyiri has in mind include Oswald Spengler, Paul Ernst, and Michael Oakshott.

In substance, there is a consistent emphasis on context, tradition, particularity, holism, and on the embeddedness of social phenomena, rather than context-independent arguments to demonstrate general truths securely founded on reason. Wittgenstein in anti-deductive mode appeals to history and tradition

based on collective agreement in practice and cognition, which is secured by authority. In adopting a concrete style of thought, he denies the independent existence and validity of the abstract concepts, upheld by rationalist philosophers. Hence, preoccupation with empirical concrete examples and cases, for which there is no underlying universal narrative. The Wittgensteinian frame is also holistic in that the various elements of a language game cannot be teased apart and evaluated in isolation from one another. And it is dynamic in that the criteria of evaluation of knowledge claims are also provided by various language games. Such a conservative thought-style is perhaps most evident in Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following where in discussing the indeterminacy of rules and their application he stresses the importance of training, and custom, practice, technique and agreement (Nyiri 1998: 58; Kripke 1982; Bloor 1997).

7. Mannheim's thought styles and the 'Habsburg Dilemma'

In *Language and Solitude* (1995), Ernest Gellner develops a critique of Wittgenstein, and the influence of Wittgensteinian ideas the fields of politics and the social sciences, that had been a preoccupation for most of his adult life. [5] [#N5] Although Gellner fails to acknowledge Mannheim's influence, 'The Habsburg Dilemma' is a rather transparent reworking of Mannheim's analysis of conservative and liberal thought styles against the backdrop of the nineteenth century nationalism and modernisation in central Europe. And both Mannheim and Gellner are of course both drawing upon the well-established critical juxtaposition of the Enlightenment tradition and the Romantic reaction in European culture and politics from the eighteenth century. Gellner's thesis is as follows. [6] [#N6]

The *Gemeinschaft–Gesellschaft* binary is a distinction that pervades all traditional societies disrupted by processes of modernisation. The result is an opposition between two poles of knowledge, aligned with corresponding theories of society and political-economic visions of societal development: the atomistic-universalist-individualist vision implicit in Descartes, Kant and Robinson Crusoe, and which, aligned with marketisation, liberalism and 'bloodless cosmopolitanism', is counterpoised to a communal, cultural, organic counter-picture. This organic vision was:

> first lived and practised unreflectively, then articulated by Herder and 'romantic rightists', stressing totality, system, connectedness, particularism, cultural specificity, favouring *Gemeinschaft*, roots, 'closed cosy communities', *blut und boden* (Steven Lukes' 'Forward' to Gellner 1995: xiv).
>
> The great *ideological* confrontation was between the closed, cosy, Community and the open, icy, individualist Society (Gellner 1995: 37).

Gellner then argues that the polarity between these two visions has very different political consequences depending on whether it ties in with the 'principle fissures in society', or whether, as was the case in Britain, 'it cut across them' (1995: 8–9). The 'Habsburg Dilemma' was the choice facing intellectuals and would-be modernizers in areas of central Europe in which these rival visions – 'two theories [standing] in stark contrast to each other [and forming] a chasm ... right across our total social landscape' (1995: 3) – mapped directly onto the principle political fissures of society.

Gellner's longstanding antipathy to Wittgensteinian thought was ultimately political. He sought to deconstruct the seemingly self-evident nature of this choice and to explore the space for a less destructive

engagement between the compelling need for organic community and the lived, experiential 'we-identifications' that generate the emotional and political force of nationalism on the one hand, and the unavoidable, globalising, individualising and uprooting dynamism of liberal-market society on the other. His strategy is to focus on two central European intellectuals – Wittgenstein and Malinowski – and to analyse the ways in which their own intellectual and political projects were largely formed by their (partly unconscious) response to this great dilemma. Where Wittgenstein is shown to have been trapped by the either/or character of the choice, veering from one pole to the other whilst remaining largely oblivious of the political connotations of his philosophy, Malinowski was able to reconcile elements of both *Gemeinschaftlich* Romanticism and the *Gesellschaftlich* progressivism of the Enlightenment, engendering a pragmatic political response to nationalism prefiguring Gellner's own (e.g. 1981, 1983, 1997).

In the *Tractatus,* Gellner argues, Wittgenstein takes the traditional point of departure of Western philosophy – that is, the isolated, individual knowing subject:

> [The] individual assumed to be a standard of an invariant humanity, faces the world or his world... [The problem then being] How can he think it, conceptualise it, comprehend it? (1995: 47).

This is Wittgenstein's version of the 'universalist–atomistic' vision. For Gellner, his famous second intellectual revolution came as a result of a radical shift from this position to its organic-communal antipode. The *volte face* to the later Wittgenstein was achieved by transplanting into philosophy an essentially populist idea of knowledge in which the cultural communities or 'forms of life' are by definition self-legitimating and incommensurable with neighbouring, equally 'local' forms of knowledge. This sudden shift was only possible given the premise of a fundamental and irreconcilable choice between two options.

> The second option views human thought and language as embodied in systems of social custom, each tied to the community which employs it and each logically, ultimately, self-validating and beyond any other possible validation (1995: 72).

This move opened the way for the subsequent tradition of ordinary language philosophy which has followed Wittgenstein in applying an essentially populist solution to the Cartesian problem of the validity of knowledge. The later Wittgenstein's position involved a refutation that there could be a 'Natural Law' or a 'Law of Nations' standing above and arbitrating between idiosyncratic customs (1995: 72).

For Gellner, Wittgenstein was all the more effective in reproducing prevailing cultural assumptions because he remained largely unconscious of any links between his own philosophy and broader cultural and political questions. And because he was never forced to reflect on the binary nature of the epistemological choice, the underlying assumptions came out all the more clearly in successive one-sided philosophies. No other intellectual has ever produced, in succession, paradigmatic statements of both of liberal and conservative thought styles. And in keeping faith with this overarching epistemological dualism, Wittgenstein reveals a marked underlying continuity in his thought: *Philosophical Investigations* was born as an internal reaction to the *Tractatus*, just as, during the process of modernisation more generally, bourgeois, liberal-atomistic-universalism forced the organic-community vision into self-conscious articulation and self-definition.

The second of Gellner's *dramatis personae* was Bronislaw Malinowski, whose theory of language was elaborated in an appendix to *The Meaning of Language* by Ogden and Richards (1923). [7] [#N7] In this short contribution Malinowski argues that although the 'savage' use of speech is very effective and functional being,

deeply implicated in the purposive context of everyday life, these very merits make it unfit for scientific use. Summarising Malinowski's position, Gellner says that:

> [In sciences] … a certain detachment and standardisation are required … Standardisation of conceptual currency, and detachment from over-involvement in the multiple purposes of daily life, does not constitute a sufficient formula for either defining or explaining science: but it is, no doubt, a significant element in any answer to the question concerning the nature of science and the explanation of its amazing power and success. (1995: 147)

Capturing very well the 'phatic' operation of language in context, as a mode of action 'rather than the counter sign of thought' (1960 [1923]: 296), Malinowski in a sense sees in primitive thought and language the attributes that preoccupy the later Wittgenstein – language defined through use, and meaning though contingent local context. But although this aspect of language does not disappear in the modern cultures, it exists alongside a culture and language of science and philosophy where language is self-consciously pruned and refined in an ongoing attempt to be 'context free'. For Gellner, Malinowski has found a response to the Habsburg dilemma that eluded Wittgenstein. Gellner, Malinowski and Wittgenstein are all agreed that 'to treat this 'highly developed' scientific/referential style of language as a model for all language [would be] a terrible mistake' (Gellner 1995: 149). But where Wittgenstein's response is simply to abandon the natural law thought style altogether, or to see it as a self-enclosed language game, Malinowski, endorsed by Gellner, argues that modern cultures have no choice but to retain and to draw upon both depending on the context. In this pragmatic view scientific rationalism exists alongside the relativism of local knowledge and 'forms of life'.

At first sight this apparently multilateral approach to knowledge and rationality looks like simply a revised form of relativism. But in Gellner's view the liberal-bourgeois thought style associated with science, while co-existing with other forms, is inherently superior. Though starting out as one local tradition among many, 'atomic individualism' has generalised an 'ethic of cognition' which allows all cognitive claims to be scrutinised and compared, including its own (1995:183).

> It is simply not the case that all cognitive styles are equal. We might or might not wish this to be so, but it is simply not the case. The technological superiority of one cognitive style has transformed the world and the rules of the social game (1995:186).

But although this broadly Popperian account of the validation of cognitive scientific claims establishes the ultimate superiority of science, there are Gellner argues, still spheres in which it is markedly inferior. Despite this superiority as a 'means of orientation' in relation to the spheres of cognition and production, the tradition of natural law and liberalism cannot engender a sense of belonging and integration in the social and natural orders, nor establish the basis for obligation and cooperation, nor function as a source of symbolism and sacraments for rites of passage, nor provide consolation for tragedy.

For Gellner the significance of Malinowski's approach to the problem of language, rationality and truth is political. It allows Malinowski to advance a pragmatic view of the relationship between the disruptive dynamics of state-formation, marketisation and modernisation (the 'open, icy, individualising logic of *Gesellschaft*') on the one hand, and the perpetuation of local ethnic cultures ('the closed, cosy, *Gemeinschaft*') on the other. In practice this amounted to a limitation on the powers of states and the nurturing of local ethnic cultures and enclaves, and a partial de-linking of the two. [8] [#N8]

8. The problem with 'thought styles'

Having re-worked Mannheim's two thought styles as fundamental cognitive and political orientations in modernising societies, Gellner co-opts Malinowski to find a middle way. His approach is more historical and political than that of Wittgenstein, and certainly more concrete in specifying the ethnic and nationalist realities lurking behind the seemingly neutral categories of 'language game' and 'form of life'. And in this sense his critique of ordinary language philosophy is rather more realistic. But somewhat paradoxically, Gellner's approach does not actually challenge the underlying conceptual dualism. His critique relates to Wittgenstein's premise that there was an unavoidable choice between two philosophical approaches, each of which could only be right or wrong. Gellner's point is not that the conceptual dualism is misconceived, but rather that in both politics and philosophy both cognitive orientations have a role: in science language is pruned of contextual ambivalence and functions referentially as an abstract mirror of reality; in the everyday life of the community, language is defined contextually by use and functions performatively in the enchantment and ritual reproduction of a sense of belonging, togetherness and ontological placement.

The problems with this are manifold. The rigid separation of scientific and 'primitive'/ordinary language thought styles implies an equally sharp separation between modern and pre-modern societies which obscures the fundamental continuities in social development and the development of knowledge more generally. This also obscures real differences in the nature of *ordinary* language in different societies, and renders invisible the processual links between:

- long-term processes of social development (sociogenesis),
- the historical transformation of language games and of cognitive styles as means of orientation, and
- transformations in relation to patterns of socialisation, public standards of behavioural restraint and the personality structure.

9. The problem with Gellner (and the merits of the later Malinowski).

In his discussion Gellner notes that Malinowski later changed his view, adopting what Gellner saw as a more relativist theory of meaning in which use and context are sovereign (Gellner 1995: 152). In *Coral Gardens and their Magic,* Malinowski recanted the hermetic separation of scientific/civilised and primitive speech:

> [Previously I] argued as if theoretical uses of words in modern philosophic and scientific writings were completely detached from their pragmatic sources. This was an error ... Between the savage use of words and the most abstract and theoretical one there is only a difference of degree (1935: 58)

For Gellner it was this change of heart that was erroneous, and he asks what Malinowski could mean by 'degree':

> Is context-free culturally transcendent thought possible or is it not? *That* is the big question... The big really important philosophical divide is between those who insist on the pragmatic

nature of language, not in answer to questions about *origins* – which hardly matter – but in answer to questions concerning the *validity* of reasoning and standards (1995: 153).

But in this Gellner gets it wrong. Degree is everything. Process is everything. It is not an either/or question of whether one can achieve 'detachment' *per se*. Rather what is at issue is the balance between processes of involvement and detachment, which varies between individuals, between situations, between societies, and changes over the life-course.

Gellner treats science as a deliberately conceived second language that is purged of the accretions of over-involvement with the intention of elucidating objective truths about the world. But this is a classic instance of what Elias (1978: 111–18) refers to as process reduction. Viewed through the sociology of knowledge, science is better understood as the outcome of a very long process of social development involving intergenerational transmission and a very gradual process of conceptual refinement.

Gellner's 'big philosophical divide' actually underlines the way in which he remains trapped in the (individualistic) loop of a philosophical question: how can 'I' [the sovereign knowing subject] [9] [#N9] be sure of the validity of universal (scientific) knowledge, not least when it comes into conflict with local knowledge. His picking up of Malinowski's example of transubstantiation in the Catholic Mass is revealing. For Gellner either cultural context *is* meaning in which case transubstantiation is not just 'real to the participants' but *real per se*; or it is not real, in which case there must be a case for 'transcultural criteria'. But this is a misleading way of posing the question for two reasons. Firstly it revives the classical isolated individual, adult knowing subject of western philosophy as the standpoint for the question – the very standpoint that he is at pains to critique all the way through the book. Secondly, it takes a single truth problem and considers it out of historical and social context, or more specifically, in isolation from a sequence of conceptual and practical problems that unfold as part of an incremental refinement of a particular 'means of orientation' (in this case Catholic theology in relation to scientific rationalism). Such long term intergenerational knowledge processes take place in the context of equally long term processes of social development. The question of the ultimate 'truthfulness', objectivity and validity of the kind of knowledge of reality contained in the catholic theology cannot be and is not resolved in a philosophical court of law. It is not a question that is asked by and answered for and by individuals, nor even particular social groups and institutions at a fixed point in time. It is not in fact 'answered' except retrospectively as future generations reflect on the historical process through which the balance of influence between competing 'means of orientation' available to successive past generations changes one way, or another. In this case the means of orientation implied by the doctrine of transubstantiation seems to have waned considerably, even if it remains compelling for some groups and individuals.

Gellner's struggle to reconcile scientific realism with the 'subjective truths' of context-bound meaning defined in practice, communal identifications and tradition is illuminating. His instinctive sense, that Wittgeinsteinian ordinary language philosophy as it played out in the real world, established a wall of incommensurability between language communities or ethnic enclaves, was absolutely right. But his solution – the mechanical combination of both cognitive orientations – is unconvincing because ultimately he fails to address the underlying conceptual problem.

10. From 'thought styles' to processes of involvement & detachment.

In *Involvement and Detachment* (2007), Elias elaborated a Comtean epistemology combined with a sociology of knowledge processes. Even more than Gellner, Elias owes a debt to Mannheim, with whom he studied. As with Gellner, this debt is barely acknowledged. However, Elias succeeds where Gellner fails in transcending the tension between the characteristic thought styles of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, in a manner that affirms Malinowski's later intuition that 'primitive' and scientific thinking should be seen on a social-developmental continuum – that is, as a matter of degree.

His principal point of departure in the analysis of this knowledge process is the interdependence of the safety/danger balance on the one hand, and the involvement/detachment balance on the other. The relationship between knowledge and social development hinges, Elias argues, on the complex feedback loops – both 'virtuous' and 'vicious' – between these two balances. Early in human development animistic knowledge about the world was characterised by higher degrees of fantasy and magical-mythical content, consequent upon greater degrees of involvement. Putative connections between events and phenomena were, to a much greater degree, posited in relation to the direct meaning they had for the self. The paradigmatic questions would not concern 'how' a phenomena occurred, but 'why it happened to me'. And this is exactly the perspective that Evans Pritchard (1937) found to be intrinsic to the operation of Azande witchcraft as a means of orientation. Elias shows how high levels of danger induce greater degrees of involvement, making more detached observation and induction of possible connections between events and phenomena more difficult – and hence create obstacles to the expansion of the social stock of reality-congruent knowledge about the world. As a result of this 'double bind' [10] [#N10] the early stages of the knowledge process are relatively slow and tortuous. An early example would include the time, foresight, affective restraint (deferral of gratification) and the relatively detached understanding of the qualities of the raw material required to collect the correct stone and create stone tools for use in a subsequent hunting expedition. However, to the extent that the knowledge process does move forward, each extension of detachment consistently enhances the capacity of human beings to control non-human nature. Over many millennia, in consequence of hundreds of small technological innovations, and in tandem with a steadily increasing stock of concepts and terms expressing more reality-congruent understandings about the connections between processes and events in the natural world, the balance between danger and safety shifts in favour of the latter (at least vis-à-vis non-human nature). [11] [#N11] Thus for Elias, there is a consistent and reciprocal relationship between (a) the level of detachment represented by public standards of thinking about natural events, and (b) the level and manner of control of non-human nature represented by public standards of manipulating them (2007: 71, 75). This gradual shift from a vicious loop or 'double-bind' in the relationship between the involvement/detachment and safety/danger ratios, to a virtuous loop, proceeds according to 'the principle of facilitation' – and Elias points out that this process starts extraordinarily slowly:

> Only by being aware of the compelling nature of this vicious circle can one understand the extraordinary slowness of the development of mankind in its early stages. Only thereby can one divest oneself of the naïve egocentrism which today – now that the jaws of the trap posed by non-human natural events have opened somewhat, now that one has learned as the result of a blind process how to control oneself in order to control extra-human nature – presents this relatively late phase in human development as the natural and eternal state of mankind...One encounters here a central problem of the whole development of humanity, which has been concealed ...by the naïve egocentrism embodied in our whole conceptual world: how was it possible at all for people to prise open the jaws of the trap and escape the vicious circle (2007: 76).

Nevertheless, over many millennia, as the size of this relatively insulated sphere safety increases (the 'anthroposphere' within the biosphere), the achievement of more detached understandings becomes progressively easier to achieve (2007: 26–7). It is for this reason that later the growth in the social fund of knowledge is characterised by rapid if not quite exponential acceleration.

As with Gellner, Elias's starting point is a critique of philosophical theories of knowledge which start from the premise of an individual knowing subject conceived outside of any social context and without reference to the process of learning (language and concepts) nor its corollary – a common fund of pre-existing, human knowledge. In place of this isolated *homo clausus* (or 'thinking statue'), Elias posits groups of interdependent individuals or *homines aperti*, learning, sharing and modifying language and concepts together, and in the context of a myriad of interweaving activities and social functions (2010; see Mennell 1998: 188–92 for a full discussion).

For Elias, the language of traditional epistemology is reifying, the absolutist conception of truth forcing an unrealistic bifurcation between objective and subjective standpoints. His own emphasis on the growth of knowledge as an iterative, spiralling and inter-generational *process* precludes this kind of dichotomy. For Elias all human behaviour and all processes of cognition are characterised by a blend of both involvement and detachment. This balance is variable: between individuals depending on intellectual capacities; between children and adults; in relation to single individuals in relation to different emotional states, social contexts and situations (for instance, compare being at an international football match and reading in a newspaper in a library); between contemporaneous societies; and in relation to particular societies as they develop over time.

Such variability certainly implies a measure of relativity about the 'objectivity' or reality-congruence of knowledge. But such relativity notwithstanding, Elias is also clear that long term processes of social development are associated with demonstrable expansions (and sometimes contractions) of the social stock of knowledge (2007: 17). This means that of more complex, more developed societies it is possible to say:

> control of emotions in experiencing nature, as that of nature itself, has grown. Involvement has lessened, but it has not disappeared. Even scientific approaches to nature do not require the extinction of other more involved and emotive forms of approach. What distinguishes these from other less detached approaches is the manner in which tendencies towards detachment and towards involvement balance each other and blend (2007: 71).

As a result of an 'unusual continuity of intergenerational transmission of knowledge, over several thousand years, [people of advanced societies] have become the heirs to great riches in the form of knowledge, and the practices connected with it.' (2007: 115) This more 'comprehensive and realistic fund of knowledge' provides a more effective means of orientation vis-à-vis the dangers constituted by non-human nature, increasing the safety/danger ratio and facilitating a lessening of the involvement/detachment ratio, which in turn facilitates the further advance of knowledge and the further improvement in cognitive orientation. Avoiding the opposition between 'scientific truth' and 'science as ethno-science', Elias's criteria for the objectivity of knowledge are essentially pragmatic, developmental and processual. Advances in the reality-congruence of knowledge are embodied in language and the social stock of concepts which, in turn, limit variations in the involvement/detachment balance between individuals, or between different contexts.

Although he characteristically makes no reference to any social science literature, in *Involvement and Detachment* Elias is making an oblique intervention in a long-running debate in twentieth century anthropology about 'the primitive mind'. In this context, especially given his pariah status, Elias's oblique defence of Lévy-Bruhl, in the context of the programmatic agenda of *Involvement and Detachment*, is

significant (2007: 121-122, fn 10). [12] [#N12] It is the closest that Elias comes to a direct critique of the unfolding parameters of the epistemological debate in sociology. Whilst acknowledging that Lévy-Bruhl was unable to 'break through the philosophical barrier' constituted by the 'separation of reason as an eternal form and knowledge as a mutable content', he insists that his books 'have considerable merit' and have been 'wrongly neglected' (2007: 121-122, fn 1). Lévi-Strauss on the other hand, celebrated by theoretically-inclined social scientists during the 1970s and1980s, produced only 'a sophisticated artifact'. The latter's failure, for Elias, was a direct consequence of his refusal to countenance a developmental framework which precludes any 'genuine understanding of human groups that represent an earlier stage in the development of knowledge and danger control' Reference required? (2007: 121-122, fn 10). Lévi-Strauss is hindered by the 'unfounded' fear that 'the ordering of earlier- and later-stage people in terms of a process, a sequential order, may imply a lowering of human dignity of the former' (2007: 121-122, fn 10) (for Elias the 'opposite is the case'). But it is precisely this refusal to countenance long-term processes of development and the associated sensibility that saw any putative sequential order as synonymous with comparative moral judgements, that was established as a cornerstone of the Boasian programme (see, for example, Boas 1911). And it was the well-meaning *cultural relativism* of this early twentieth century anthropology that prepared the ground for Spiro's (1992) *normative* (moral and cognitive) and *epistemological* relativism.

So how does an epistemology which foregrounds the intergenerational process of concept formation in the context of long term processes of social development take us forward? A focus on processes of *involvement* and *detachment* allows anthropologists to grasp the very real differences between 'primitive' and 'modern' modes of perception and cognition without either compromising the unity of the human psyche, or undermining the dignity of earlier-stage people. It allows for the relativity of cognitive processes to language and concepts, whilst recognising a degree of open-ended sequential order in the refinement of these in relation to wider processes of social development. This is achieved principally by attending to the 'condition of not-knowing', that precedes the condition of knowing. Elias underlines the obvious but often neglected truth that knowledge and concepts are produced in a sequential order. Once concepts have been established and become part of language, it is difficult to 'un-think' them, and so see the world through the categories of people at an earlier stage who do not have access to such knowledge (2007: 21).

It is in this way that individual capacities for more or less reality-congruent thinking about the world mesh with societal patterns. Childhood socialisation involves the internalisation of an enormous social fund of knowledge about the world, which becomes an intuitive, largely unconscious awareness about the causal connections between different processes and events.

> The way in which individual members of a group experience whatever affects their senses, the meaning which it has for them, depends on the standard forms of dealing with, and of thinking and speaking about, these phenomena which have gradually evolved in their society. Thus, although the degree of detachment shown in one's encounter with natural forces may vary from individual to individual and from situation to situation, the concepts themselves which, in societies like ours, all individuals use in thinking, speaking and acting – concepts like 'lightning', 'tree' or 'wolf' no less than 'electricity', 'organism', 'cause-and-effect' or 'nature' – in the sense in which they are used today, represent a relatively high degree of detachment; so does the socially induced experience of nature as a 'landscape' or as 'beautiful' (2007: 70).

Elias gives the example of our concept of *the* moon: in all modern children's books, the moon is referred to in the singular and with the definite article. But formulated in this way, the concept is loaded with thousands of

years of observations and highly reality-congruent knowledge about the relationship between the earthly bodies in the solar system.

> It is very likely that at an earlier stage, human beings did not, and indeed could not, know that the thin sickle of the new moon and the fat round face of the full moon were different appearances of the same thing. They may have had different words for them without necessarily having a unitary word akin to our term 'moon', which, after all, represents a synthesis at a higher level compared with the concepts for the different shapes of the moon which one is able to see here and now (2007: 120).

The recognition of the co-development of (i) language, (ii) the complexity and intensity of relationships between interdependent people, and (iii) the scale, scope and intensity of human exploitation of non-human nature, along with an insistence on maintaining 'humanity as a whole' as a frame of reference, has a number of implications Firstly there are translation problems: members of scientific societies find it very difficult to appreciate what members of earlier-stage societies (both ancestral and contemporary) do not know – that is, distinctions and connections (such between living/ non-living, people/animals and so on) that may be an obvious and even intuitive aspect of fund of concepts and ideas that children of later-stage societies absorb unconsciously with language. This partly explains the perplexity of Lévy-Bruhl and other anthropologists in the face of apparently illogical 'primitive mentality'.

Secondly, although 'the range of individual variations in detachment ... is limited by the public standards of detachment embodied in modes of thinking and speaking about nature and in the widely institutionalised use of natural forces for human ends'(Elias 2007: 70) – such public standards change over time, and this change tends to be directional and sequential. The extent to which such change should be characterised as an 'advance' becomes an empirical and definitional problem. In the course of human history, more effective cognitive regimes embodying relatively higher public standards of detachment have tended to displace regimes embodying lower standards (or stimulated cultural-linguistic imitation and 'catch-up'). At no point in human development, and in no geographical locale does it make sense to consider societies as hermetically-sealed cultures or isolated 'language games'.

Thirdly, this emphasis on open-ended and counterbalancing processes of involvement and detachment, allows for:

- •a descriptive cultural relativism: that different societies see and do things differently,
- •a moral relativism; that aesthetic and ethical judgements are culturally contingent,
- •a *weak*cognitive relativism: that processes of cognition and perception are 'socially constructed' through language,

but without giving way to epistemological relativism – the free-for-all of 'subjective truths' and incommensurable 'ethno-sciences'. The commensurability of such ethno-sciences is guaranteed by the interaction of cultures and languages.

And fourthly, extending Malinowski's insight that scientific and pre-scientific thought styles actually co-exist, the concept of involvement /detachment as a *variable ratio* is sensitive to the fact that the balance can change over the course of an individual's life time, at different times of the day or year, between different social and political contexts and personal circumstances, and in relation to different role-contexts (such as the spheres of professional as opposed to domestic or leisure activity). And of course there are degrees of involvement operating even in the most 'objective' context of scientific activities and procedures. Elias describes as

'secondary re-involvement' the visceral aesthetic or intellectual pleasure that a researcher might experience in such circumstances, where a strong, emotive commitment with regard to an exciting vocational experience, might interweave with a high degree of detachment with regard to the results or outcomes of such activity (Elias and Dunning 1986).

11. Conclusion: towards a historical sociology of language games

Elias's work has a number of parallels with the conservative thought-style and there are notable similarities with diverse writers such as Heidegger, Kuhn and Latour, all of whom reject individualist approaches to the investigation of social life. Building on Durkheim and alongside the tradition of Mead, Cooley and Goffman in America and Bourdieu in France, Elias consistently sought (to paraphrase Mead) to 'approach conduct socially and from the outside'.

Although sharing this emphasis on language and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, Wittgenstein only ever refers to transmission between two generations in the context of childhood socialisation (thus he is thinking only in dyadic terms). He never develops the idea of successive generations contributing to a social stock of knowledge over tens and hundreds of generations. There is no recognition of the long-term development and history of language games, nor any discussion of the iterative and cumulative process of concept formation and refinement. And because he never refers to any actual language communities, there is no recognition of how languages influence each other, co-habit in 'multi-lingual games', and even displace each other. And yet the history and sociology of ordinary language is overflowing with such examples. [13] [#N13]

Wittgenstein is ahistorical and seems utterly oblivious to the political implications of his version of ordinary language philosophy. But these become rather more obvious when someone like Peter Winch applies abstract philosophy to social problems. As Gellner points out, the symmetrical relativist injunction to 'respect your culture right or wrong' might make sense in a world of hermetically sealed cultural islands, but in the real world of overlapping and unstable cultural zones, cross-cutting borders, and multiple identifications, the 'form of life' as a unit of analysis becomes worse than meaningless. In the context of Balkanized political conflicts it can become genocidally divisive.

Eschewing any historical sociology of language games, Wittgenstein's philosophy is ultimately myopic: analytical rather than synoptic in view and synchronic rather than diachronic. Knowledge problems are consistently conceptualised statically in relation to 'points in time', rather than processually. This is inevitable consequence of his philosophical point of departure. His questions are necessarily hypothetical and divorced from any actual historical transformation or knowledge process.

Where traditional philosophy asks: 'How can I (the individual knowing subject) know?', Wittgenstein changes the question only slightly: 'How can we (participants in this hypothetical and ahistorical language game) know?' Elias by contrast, asks a reflexive historical-sociological question: 'Under what conditions does the social stock of knowledge available to particular figurations of interdependent human beings, in a specified historical time-frames, expand in a particular direction?' Only a research programme starting from this latter question can hope to reconcile problems of epistemology dealing with the truth status of knowledge on the one hand, with the sociology of knowledge, and the relativity of human judgements, on the other. This is not simply an esoteric epistemological dilemma. The capacity of the social sciences to improve our collective means of orientation in relation to societal organisation and regulation depends very much on our ability to

recognise and accommodate problems of involvement and detachment not only in the practice of social research but eventually in the shared concepts, vocabulary and public standards of behaviour through which we regulate our social and political life more generally. The social scientific paradigm of 'language games' assumes potentially belligerent and incommensurable we-identities as a universal and immoveable starting point for social and political conflict. With the early Malinowski, Gellner's twin track solution assumes an untenable separation between science and popular culture. In Elias and the later Malinowski we have a formulation which allows for a slow but steady improvement in our collective capacity to view the social processes in which we are all psychologically, politically and economically enmeshed – from the outside. 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.

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Notes

1. It has been argued that the conflict between interpretation and causal explanation, for example in the work of Dilthey, has its roots in the German university disputes between modernists and 'cultural mandarins' (Ringer 1983). [#N1-ptr1]
2. See also Gellner, 1995: 8, 22. In a sense Mannheim's conservative thought style and its association with ethnic localism and a self-conscious *Gemeinschaft* can be thought of as an ambiguous corollary aspect of the social movements for protection that followed in the wake of 'the great transformation' (Polanyi, 1944) [#N2-ptr1]
3. This is similar to what Ingold refers to as the 'education of attention'. 'Placed in specific situations, novices are instructed to feel this, taste that or watch out for the other thing. Through this fine-tuning of perceptual skills, meanings immanent in the environment – that is in the relational contexts of the perceiver's involvement in the world – are not so much constructed as discovered' (Ingold, 2000: 22). [#N3-ptr1]
4. For reasons of brevity we assume some familiarity with the work of Norbert Elias. See Quilley and Loyal (2005a & b) and Mennell (1998) for commentaries. [#N4-ptr1]
5. Many of the themes were prefigured as early as 1959 in *Words and Things*. [#N5-ptr1]
6. We have been happy to draw freely on Steven Lukes's excellent précis and commentary in the Forward to *Language & Solitude*. [#N6-ptr1]

7. That Ogden was also the translator of *Tractatus* brings an interesting biographical twist to the comparison. [#N7-ptr1]
8. The situation that Gellner alludes to is not dissimilar to the position of minority nations and languages within an expanding and integrating European Union. [#N8-ptr1]
9. What Elias (2010) referred to as the 'we-less I'. [#N9-ptr1]
10. Elias took over the term 'double bind', from Gregory Bateson (1972), although applying it in a sociological context devoid of Bateson's original associations with schizophrenia. See Elias, 2007: 108. [#N10-ptr1]
11. Sometimes steady and incremental, such shifts at other times occur rapidly with potentially destabilising results. Elias is at pains to emphasise that advances in control at one level can lead to diminution of control at other levels. For example, the development of agriculture marks a definite extension in control over non-human nature and, as Goudsblom (1995) has pointed out, the process of agrarianisation necessarily implies the extension of (i.) social controls over individuals in the form of the division of labour and acquiescence to the disciplines of peasant production, but also (ii.) psychological controls over self in the form of internalised constraints that become an aspect of early socialisation (e.g. the 'detour behaviour' and deferred gratification involved in saving grain for later planting rather than consuming in the present). But agrarianisation also creates new vulnerabilities in relation to population growth, the vagaries of climate and neighbouring groups of humans for whom the sedentary peasant societies become tempting targets. [#N11-ptr1]
12. There are longer and earlier discussions in unpublished papers as well as Elias's correspondence with Raymond Aron in 1939 – all available at the Elias archive in Marbach. See also *Vingtième Siècle (*2010) [#N12-ptr1]
13. Elias's own analysis of the historical emergence of personal pronouns in relation to wider processes of social development is a brilliant and pertinent example (1978: 122–8). [#N13-ptr1]

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