

Four Interviews with Norbert Elias

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An interview in Bloomington, Indiana (1982) with Gregor Hahn

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G. Hahn, West European Center: Professor Elias, might we begin by solving some of the problems presented by scant biographical information on your own long term process?

Norbert Elias, Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung, Bielefeld: Well, there will be some 'Notizen zum Lebenslauf' in the next *Materialienband*. [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#) I do not know when that will be out. I should think in May or July of this year. It's almost ready. But if you wish to ask things ... please!

Hahn: Yes, perhaps you might comment on your teachers, on specific influences, and on what appears to be two-part division of your career marked by the renewed interest in *The Civilizing Process*.

Elias: Well, it is the first interest! Not a renewed interest! There was no interest at all. To such an extent that the man who published *The Civilizing Process* first, a very nice German émigré in Basel – I very often came to visit him, and, in the end, he said look, no one is... there is no chance that anyone will buy it! Can we remainder it? And I said, well, wait another year. Then he sold, I think, ten copies or something like that and that gave him courage to wait again. Within a relatively short time his edition was sold out. But that didn't mean that there was a real interest. There were initially one or two reviews by, all by friends or acquaintances of mine. And then a complete void. So there was no interest at all in the English-speaking world, and then the first breakthrough was when Suhrkamp published the pocket edition. That was a breakthrough in Germany.

Hahn: And when was that?

Elias: Well, to tell you the truth, I am so imprecise with dates and my life is so long that I don't really rightly know. It was probably in the 1960's. And for that I had to fight enormously hard, because the Swiss publisher, Francke Verlag, had a hardback edition. And I tried to persuade them that I must have a pocket edition. In the end, the publisher agreed if I pay him his loss. So – I was not very wealthy at the time, not that I am now, but I didn't have *any* money at the time. But I stayed with it and got it: the ability to give it to a German publisher. I had the choice between Rowohlt and Suhrkamp and decided on Suhrkamp. That was the real breakthrough.

Hahn: Why wasn't it noticed the first time?

Elias: Because, as I said in the last seminar, evolutionism is a stigmatising term. The idea that one deals with long term processes is burdened with the memory of the eighteenth and nineteenth century process-idea. One implicitly – although I carefully avoided this – one implicitly understood it in terms of the renewal of the eighteenth and nineteenth century progress theories. One could not see that one might, at a new level, approach long term processes without metaphysics. That was very different. I mean, once certain types of

ideas are stigmatised and tarnished, it is very difficult to un-complicate them. I think, well, this is only one reason. There are several reasons, but this is the first.

Hahn: What was it that brought you to work?

Elias: It was always clear from the time of my doctoral dissertation, for certain reasons which I myself don't understand! – that what we observe has *become* what it is. There is nothing on earth which has not *become* what it is. No concept, no style or art. So, you cannot come to grips with it without re-constructing the process of that *becoming*. Which is *not* history – of course, that was the second thing. Everybody understood it as history. And I have to this day very great difficulties in making clear that history proceeds on a very low level of synthesis. And I proceed on a relatively high level of synthesis. This is very different from what we call history. I don't know whether I am making myself clear.

Hahn: Yes, you are. And you've made yourself clear in the seminars as well.

Elias: So that was the second thing. Then, alright, if one saw it: he is a historical sociologist. I could say what I wanted. I could say, 'Look at it. Is it the way historians write or is it not different?' I could say what I wanted. And since then, I *know* that science is a power struggle, and there is a lot this power struggle in here [referring to a recent paper], in my essay on scientific establishments.

Hahn: And these power struggles play an important role here?

Elias: In my theory of science; that's right. One cannot really understand science without understanding the power relations of those who determine what is accepted as a relevant scientific investigation, and what is not accepted. And without this... But it is mainly directed against the philosophers have completely non-developmental theories of science. And if science is anything at all it is a process. So, to treat science as it were *here and now* thing is absurd. Science is a process. So one has, at first, to remove the barriers which philosophers put in the way of working theories of sciences. And that is what I try and do here: it's a rather polemical essay.

Hahn: Can you place your finger upon specific influences from your long list of eminent teachers?

Elias: Yes. Well, I learned from my philosophy teacher, from whom I have great veneration and respect, that by thinking one can find something out!

Hahn: [Laughter] That's a very radical idea!

Elias: Yes. [Laughter] A very *radical* idea. But he was a very stern, austere man of the old school. A Neo-Kantian, a magnificent intellect, and our whole relationship ended in a row because I attached the *a priori* in my doctoral dissertation. And he said: *I won't let it go!* I won't accept it! Those were the days...

Hahn: Who was that?

Elias: Hönigswald. A Neo-Kantian of really considerable imagination. I mean he dealt with such subjects! He had written a *Denkpsychologie*, and he dealt with *über das Verlieren des roten Fadens* – a very imaginative topic. With such things he was very imaginative, but very authoritarian. He did not wish to accept it [the dissertation]. And, as I have said, at that time I knew already very clearly that – well, you will find it in this essay if you cared to look at it – that the Kantian concept of the *a priori* is untenable. There will be another essay against Popper in the next volume of essays.

Hahn: On what grounds?

Elias: Well, I think he's entirely wrong! [Laughter]

Hahn: [Laughter] How?

Elias: Well, you will read it. I call it 'The Creed of a Nominalist'. He's a nominalist. He's also... He has done an enormous amount of – a great deal of – harm. He has persuaded people that merely by thinking up deductively a hypothesis, they can really start a scientific investigation – which is terrible. This will be in a volume called *Involvement and Detachment* due to come out soon, but I still have fifteen pages of the introduction to write.

Hahn: How did things fare with The Frankfurt School?

Elias: Well, there was a slight tension between our camps. We were in the same building. It was a very odd set up because the University had rented for the sociology department the ground floor of the *Institut für Sozialwissenschaft, Sozialforschung*. So we were at the same building and, of course, on very polite terms. When I asked Horkheimer could I perhaps have a room, he said, 'Of course' – or, could I use the library of the Institute, he said, 'Of course'. We were on very polite terms; but there were no intellectual connections – except that one or two people rotated from one camp to the other. I knew both Horkheimer and Adorno in a distant way, and I think that Adorno would not have liked that I got the Adorno Prize, the first Adorno Prize of the City of Frankfurt. But I was of course civilised about it.

Hahn: During the War, did you go directly to England?

Elias: I went first to Paris, and then to England. First to France and then to England. I left France, of course, since there was no chance ever to get into a university, and in England it took me... around twenty years to get back to the university.

Hahn: And what did you do during those twenty years?

Elias: I worked in education, in Foreign Affairs, with business abroad –

Hahn: And then on your own work in spare hours?

Elias: [Continuing to reflect] Yes, exactly. I came to England in '35 and I got the University appointment in Leicester in 1954.

Hahn: To jump back only a few months, what has been the focus of the recent seminars in Bielefeld?

Elias: Well, I have been pursuing a topic of an unknown book of mine on established/outsider relationships. I think one cannot bring all established/outsider relationships under the heading of class relationships. And... It's a broader concept. In order, for instance, to really understand the relationship between men and women which was until a very short time ago a typical established/outsider relationship, or the Colonial people and Imperial people – all that are established/outsider relationships. It has a precise meaning, and the term establishment here goes into the same context. The term establishment has become a technical term. That was the theme of several seminars.

Hahn: Drawing upon *The Established and the Outsider: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*?

Elias: Yes, but I have worked on it much more. The Dutch edition has already a long and new introduction which has not yet been published in Germany or England.

Hahn: Would this coincide with views of tragedy as the expulsion of the established, and views of comedy as the attempted integration of the outsiders?

Elias: I'm not sure, because comedy is more certain of being something in its own right. The outsiders can always be stigmatised. Well, yes, the comedian can also be stigmatised. But it has to do with power relations.

Behind all that is a concentrated theory of power relations.

Hahn: Is there a personal element in this?

Elias: Oh, yes, that is quite possible. That is quite possible, yes. And certainly I was an outsider in the relation to the sociological establishment.

Hahn: And as a Jew in Germany?

Elias: Well, I would say the Polish Jews, too, were outsiders; and the German Jews, although so assimilated and very identified with Germany, were nevertheless outsiders. Yes, that's an interesting problem. Very interesting. I have written in the *Notizen zum Lebenslauf* a short three or four pages on that, on this problem.

Hahn: There was in effect a turning away from philosophy in the early stages of your academic career, wasn't there?

Elias: Yes; perhaps I should have pursued this. It was a very deliberate *break* with philosophy which I undertook. A transition to sociology. It was a *very* deliberate break away from philosophy. I make a clear distinction between philosophy and sociology. Sociology is a science, a social science, bound by substantive knowledge of empirical data and theories, and philosophy can speculate on one's heart's desire without legitimising itself systematically through empirical tests. When I came as a student to Heidelberg, I was on very good terms with Jaspers. But when I came the second time, I hardly saw him.

Hahn: Because of the transition which had occurred in the meantime?

Elias: Because then I was – I had become – a sociologist, and although Jaspers had a very high regard for Max Weber... He is and was a very honest man, whom I very highly respected, [but] it was not my cup of tea.

Hahn: Can you comment on your study under Max? Or was it only Alfred Weber?

Elias: No, it was only Alfred Weber. I never experienced Max Weber in person, only the resonance of Max Weber and Marianna Weber. I gave a lecture at her house. She had a salon – she had a salon, yes. One could not hope to become a *Privat Dozent* in Heidelberg as I'd hoped to become without her approval [laughter]. One can tell endlessly about these things. There was a very high intellectual niveau. It was very stimulating in Heidelberg in the time between 1925 and 1929. Very stimulating.

Hahn: And can you say the same about England afterwards?

Elias: I really don't know. I don't know *yet!* I recently wrote to the Vice Chancellor of Leicester when he said that the Department of Sociology was threatened with being cut down, telling him what a great tradition this Department had. At least, I should think, six present professors of Sociology started as Assistant Lecturers in Leicester. They all went different ways, but there was a good selection of gifted people. I don't know whether you know Keith Hopkins? He was a scholar of ancient history and came to us at Leicester from being a pupil of Finley at Cambridge. And we thought it was a good thing if someone who knows ancient history should also know something about sociology. He has written now a great book on, I think, the sociology of the Roman Empire.

Hahn: Sports, play and games are important themes for your work. Does this interest continue?

Elias: Yes; less than in former days, but it is of very high interest for me as a sociological problem, because sport is for me a symbol of the way (as I usually say, it has the same character as the attempt make atomic power useful – harmlessly useful for human beings) because sport is a way in which restrained violence can be marshalled in such a way that it follows rules. And as such it is a very worthwhile attempt. I think

enormously highly of sport as a necessity in a civilisation like ours, because it enables the people who perform it, as well as in some cases the spectators, to channel tendencies of attacking others in accordance with very fixed rules. And this is a very highly civilised thing. One of my better essays is a comparison between sport in the Olympic games – which were no sport, which were far more violent, because the ruling was far less strict. And this was with Eric Dunning. Dunning came to me as a student and I remember when he said he would like to write his thesis, I asked him what his hobby was, and he said ‘football’. Then I said, ‘Why don’t you write on that!’ ‘It is not possible. It’s not a respectable subject.’ I remember that very distinctly. I said, ‘We’ll make it respectable academically.’ And we did.

Hahn: The two of you then worked together subsequently?

Elias: Well, we have written together three or four essays, which also will come out soon after *Involvement and Detachment*. There will be a volume of our essays on sport – partly together, partly by him, partly by me.

Hahn: Does that include a discussion of American football?

Elias: I was particularly interested, but I did not feel that I could venture far into the way and the reasons American football developed differently out of some forms of English football in a different direction. That could be sociologically very interesting. The descent is indisputable, via, as far as I know, the schools and universities. So, you see, again I do not really investigate without getting at the genesis. And that is still a little unquestionable, I think.

Hahn: Is the focus solely upon group sports? Or do individual sports figure into this as well?

Elias: Yes, mainly group sports. When I investigate, when I compare our type of sport with the athletics of the Olympic games, I have often to compare individual achievements, because, you see... Wrestling, for example, in antiquity was far more violent, far less hedged in by rules than ours. And the same is true with running. So it goes both ways. If you mean individual sport – well, this is always a group sport, because there is always a competition. It doesn’t make so much difference since it is always between people. All these things are not an individual in isolation, but people in relation to each other.

Hahn: What about competition with the self? Competitions of endurance, or time?

Elias: It is always a combat with the self, because it requires an amount of self-discipline. Times are measured against others who have done the same times. I think sport is essentially a struggle between human beings.

Hahn: Roy Arthur Swanson, in the introduction to his translation of Pindar’s *Odes* touches on something which is interesting here. He contrasts the aristocratic temperament of the late Vince Lombardi, with respect to winning, with a democratic temperament which values simply playing the game.

Elias: Well, this was the initial sport ideology of the English – that what matters is the game. That is very important, the tension of the game...

Hahn: Not the outcome?

Elias: Not the results. But it has become more and more watered down through national competition between nations in the Olympic games where, decidedly, the winning matters. There, what really matters is the medals. So sociologically this impairs the process.

Hahn: Could political tensions be *resolved* by sports? Could, for example, the present crisis in the Falkland/Malvinas Islands be resolved in a game?

Elias: Well, it would be better if the Argentines and the British could play a game of football with each other. And whoever wins, gets the Falkland Islands! I mean, certainly in that great respect, too, sport has a civilising influence. If two neighbouring African nations in high tension with each other play football, of course the home team may get more applause and the multitude of them – of the spectators – may get wild if the home team loses. But nevertheless the umpire is forced to stick to the rules, at least, must try to stick to the rules, because the international football association regards as valid only games played according to rules. So it has a softening influence. It *can* have, I should say. Sport! It's wonderful that we have it. I think it's a wonderful invention. If only one realises that this is a very *recent* invention. It doesn't exist prior to the end of the eighteenth, beginning of the nineteenth century. One had combats of course, much earlier throughout the Middle Ages, but they were much wilder. To have brought this out as part of the civilising process is quite important for us.

Hahn: That's not to say that play is new. Don't many of these sports go back much further?

Elias: But people never look at the details of how those games were played. Of course, we have a report from the, I think, eleventh century or earlier that football was also played before the doors of London by the apprentices. But if one looks at it, it was not *our* football. The name was the same, but the game was not the same.

Hahn: Then it is the rules which give identity?

Elias: One can see this quite clearly, and determine how the rules developed. This one can determine quite clearly.

Hahn: And the changes in societies which would make a person wish to opt into a particular game?

Elias: Yes, exactly. Eric Dunning has written a very good book on the development of rugby, through going back to the public school – quite barbarian gentlemen and players. So that is the line along which we worked. If one looks, if one is not *deceived* by the word... For example, the Peruvian Indians played tennis, or, at least, had hard rubber balls, but if you look at it... I am not sure at the moment, but I think the defeated was executed or something like that. Much wilder. Sport covered initially the leisure time of the upper classes. I have written – and you may find this very ridiculous – a slight paper on fox-hunting, because fox-hunting was one of the earliest sports. And you can see *there* to what extent this type of hunting was regulated far more strictly than the previous forms of hunting. Not only that, this was hunting which was *its own end*, because the fox was not eaten. The fox was thrown to the dogs. It was the hunt – I mean, the people would say it's a pity that we didn't *get* the fox, but he has given us a *good run*!

Hahn: Or as American English has it still, a good run for our *money*!

Elias: Yes. So there one can see how... Well, cricket has never penetrated far outside the English Commonwealth, but cricket was one of the earliest sports, played partly by the young aristocrats, played partly by servants of the aristocrats. There is a peculiar social relationship characteristic of England that if you had an able lad, you trained him for cricket and you made bets on him. Betting played a very great part in the need for regulating things – because when you wanted to lay bets, you had to pit relatively *equal* people against each other. So you had to have fairly clear rules that the opponents are not too unequal. Aristocratic betting played a very large part of this sense of fairness.

Hahn: And are there relationships between the codes of games and the codes of warfare?

Elias: Yes, but it has mainly to do with class relations. You treat an officer of the enemy differently from the private soldier if taken prisoner. There is sort of *decorum* which you observe in relation to officers because

they belong to the same class, and so it was with the knights. Hostile knights observed sometimes a certain code because they were of the same class.

Hahn: So class transcends the other allegiances?

Elias: Very often, in early days, aristocratic class-belonging was much more important than national belonging, in many respects. But that, well, there is so much to be investigated. So much to be investigated.

Hahn: Thank you, Professor Elias.

'We still haven't learnt to control nature and ourselves enough' (1984): Interview with Aafke Steenhuis

Originally published in De Groene Amsterdammer, 16 May 1984. Translated from Dutch by Robert van Krieken.

At the end of the interview I ask Norbert Elias whether he has written his autobiography. *'No, just some notes.'* There is little known about your life, I say, I don't even know, for example, whether you have ever been married. *'No.'* Never? *'No, never.'* Why not? *'Well, women were always jealous of my work. It wasn't possible.'* So you felt more for your work than for women? *'Yes, I don't know ... I didn't want to be disturbed. The work was my task.'* Who gave you this task? *'Myself.'* Why did you give yourself such a heavy task? *'Perhaps it sounds puritan and conceited, but I have an unusual talent and I felt I had a duty to do something with it. A duty towards other people. And I still hold to that attitude. My assistant will be coming soon, I work even harder than ever, if I don't all is lost. Alas, alas, the women didn't want that ...'* And couldn't you find an intellectual woman, who had her own work? *'Yes, as a friend. But not to live together.'*

Norbert Elias's house in Amsterdam is a surprise. When I go up the stairs, and Elias indicates a door where I can hang my coat, I recoil: the room is full of dark figures. No, they are ebony figures, nearly life-size figures from Africa.

Elias, born in 1897, studied medicine, philosophy and psychology in Breslau, Freiberg and Heidelberg. In the 1930s he taught sociology in Frankfurt, but fled from the Nazis in 1935, to England. In 1939 he published his important work *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, but because of the war the book received little attention; that only came in the 1970s. He held a chair between 1962 and 1964 in Ghana, and now lives and works, well into his eighties, tirelessly, in Bielefeld and Amsterdam. He also wrote *The Court Society, What is Sociology?, The Established and the Outsiders, Involvement and Detachment*, and *An Essay on Time*. [2][#N2]

Norbert Elias's ideas have had great resonance in the Netherlands and other countries. His lively, original cultural analyses resonated among those who did not see very much in dry empirical sociology or rigid Marxist theories. One of Elias's central ideas is that the process of state formation since the Middle Ages – via taxation, police and armed forces, legislation – was closely related to the formation of individual conscience and self-control. As the state became more regulated, people developed more inner rules. This is because people were absorbed into increasingly large networks of dependency and had to take account of each other.

A lot has been said recently about the crisis in European culture. What is wrong with it? Is it impoverished and fossilised, as some people claim? Or is it not controlled enough, as Norbert Elias argues?

We here in Western Europe have old democratic states, with many rules and social services. That includes a specific culture, a sort of social-democratic culture with a lot of self-control, taking account of each other –

planning, not stealing, not murdering nor ill-treating others. But doesn't such a controlled, restrained culture also have dangerous aspects?

[Hesitantly]: It is a question of balance, you have situations that require some spontaneity, the release of emotions, and you have situations that demand detachment and a surplus of self-control. Love is an area where spontaneity and letting go with emotions are appropriate. But politics is no place for strong emotions.

But in reality you see that we have attained a type of person who has a regulated spontaneity in daily life, is controlled. And perhaps people are emotional precisely in the political arena ... You see very emotional, primitive sentiments in political culture. Like Reagan referring to the Soviet Union as 'the Evil Empire': he thus appeals to very emotional, infantile feelings. [3],[#N3]

[Agrees]: Yes, he stirs up the Americans' national pride. I want to tell you something that is perhaps important. I get the feeling that the current polarisation into left and right, in which everyone thinks they have to take up a position in the political spectrum between conservative and communist, is one of the reasons why we are in such a bind. We have to get out of the compulsion of this political spectrum. *The current polarity might lead us to an atomic war.*

What it boils down to is what I call 'ideological disarmament'. It is a nonsense to think we'll get there just by piling up more arms. Let the Russians build up their communist state, let the Americans build up their capitalist state, if it can be done peacefully. Ideological disarmament is essential, an easing of the fire of mutual hate and quarrelling.

How can we manage this ideological disarmament?

Even the slogan 'ideological disarmament' doesn't exist yet. It is important to give it wide exposure. If you only shout 'Peace, peace, peace' you don't bring peace any nearer. But it is precisely our task as Europeans to say: *We no longer want to hear these reciprocal outbursts of hate and propaganda. The Russians are not devils, and the Americans are not devils either. You shouldn't shout at each other like that, you are just as grubby as the rest.*

He stops for a moment, smiling a little: I've made a new division of history. Looks at me expectantly: In my division into periods we are now in the late Middle Ages ... and then you ask: 'So when does the modern period begin?' I have a clear answer to that. The modern period will begin when it has become self-evident that disputes between states are fought out by means other than war. There will always be conflicts between states. Today it is assumed that such conflicts can be fought out by killing each other, but of course that idea belongs in the Middle Ages.

[With a broad smile]: So the modern period will begin when all states have agreed that when there are difficulties they will turn to the judge. It used to be so internally too – that when there was conflict the strongest killed the weakest, wasn't it? – but gradually we have reached the point where this is no longer allowed and we go to a court of law. We should say to these Americans and these Russians: 'Calm down, have a seat, and tell us what the problem really is, then we'll look for an arbitrator or referee of some sort and try to resolve it.' That's how reasonable people do it.

That referee already exists, the International Court in The Hague, and the United Nations Security Council. But they don't listen to them.

Yes, that's dreadful, very dreadful. But it will keep going. World opinion is not yet prepared to pursue it with any vigour, but we have to work further in this direction. If you get the feeling that progress isn't possible, you

also block that path in your thinking. We have to establish a world state. We shouldn't go back to fragmentation, but towards a world federal state.

We in the West have shaped the world with our own hands: we've established industry, trade, health care and education. We think that we've tamed nature, but isn't it now turning back on us? The air, the earth, the forests have been attacked, and are now in turn attacking us.

No, what you call 'nature' is a cold, wild deserted chaos. The impression arising from what you say is that nature is good when it's untamed.

You've lived in Africa, I've travelled a lot in Latin America. Western culture tries to dominate and control everything. We think that we can live with our heads ...

Have you ever really lived among the wild? Were things that much better? I really think quite differently about this: I believe that we haven't yet learnt to control nature and ourselves enough, we have to learn to do it better. The future certainly doesn't lead back to the wild, to primitive societies.

[Leans backward, looks at me]: You know, something that saddens me is that I observe everywhere how your generation denounces, how it criticises the European world. It's as if the Europeans are the worst thing on earth! Your generation is like – forgive the comparison – the whore who turns pious in her old age! *Our fathers have sinned, they have exploited and dominated others, we are something dreadful. Pater peccavi. Father I have sinned, and now I repent.*

But what you come across in Latin America and find in Latin American literature is the imagination, the feel for history, for connection, the tie with nature, with other people, magic. We've lost that to a large extent.

None of that is true, we haven't lost our imagination. Art blossomed in the first half of the twentieth century. The younger generation, which now weeps and wails, and believes that it lives in the worst period ever, stifles its creativity.

Look, I have lived in Africa and I came to love the people there, I stand on their side. But what they do to themselves is dreadful. Ghana was a beautiful, fairly rich country, but economically it's fallen apart. Self-government is of course necessary and right, but they are going through a period of deprivation and misery, because they are barbarous and uncompromising with each other. We Europeans are a lot more careful.

But what about the outbreak of barbarity in Nazi Germany? We here in civilised Europe have had two barbarous World Wars, why the arrogance to think that we've got such an exemplary culture?

[Interrupts]: We are not at all arrogant, we've really achieved a great deal, we should be proud of what we've done. You can't always point to the two World Wars, there have been many more wars in other countries.

But not with such weapons, techniques and concentration camps.

No, not with such weapons, but just as destructive – no, not as destructive. But you know, I've gone into African history before the arrival of the Europeans. It was full of wars, conflict, violence. The colonies were the first step towards pacification. That doesn't mean that colonisation should be continued. But the Africans were just as brutal as the Europeans, and the Arabs were even more brutal. You seem to think that only the Europeans were ruthless. That isn't right! They are no better or worse than anyone else. My theory is that over the last few centuries, through a blind, unintentional process, Europe had the opportunity to get ahead in the world, as did Mesopotamia, Egypt and China earlier. China stagnated, Europe is now on the brink of stagnation, and the mentality of tearing your hair out and being anxious contributes to that. The younger

generation here, it believes that things here in Europe are the worst in the world, dreadful! You can make no headway if you spit on yourself – forgive the expression.

[A little angry]: Because of our prosperity many young people can travel and see what the situation is in Latin America, Asia, Africa. They see that we live on a small planet, that you can fly to the other side in 10 hours, and they see the economic relationship between the misery there and the wealth here.

But that doesn't mean that the people in Africa are so good and we are so bad. I am completely in favour of bringing humanity to the same level. I read an article on the shortage of telephones in China. You can't get around the fact that telephones, computers, technology have to be introduced everywhere, mechanisation has to continue, of course we have to ensure that it happens without pollution, but only in this way can a higher standard of living be achieved and poverty vanish. We can't go back to nature, that is a dreadful idea, nature is wild, blind, furious, sometimes beautiful ...

Nature is the most important thing we have, it provides our food.

The most important thing we have is what we make out of nature, not nature itself. Many people who say the word nature, connect it with the feeling of a generous mother.

[Disapproving]: You too say it with that emphasis, as if it's something good! Completely wrong! Nature is surely neither good nor bad, it's blind. Incidentally, I no longer make the distinction between nature and culture, that's a false distinction from the past. I don't glorify nature. We have grown out of nature through a natural evolution, that is, we are a piece of nature, nature is in us, we now have to take over the responsibility.

[4],[#N4]

Your Essay on Time [5],[#N5] is about the relation between physical and social time, clock time and time as it's experienced.

In English you have the verb 'to time'. Indian tribes in the Amazon area have few social needs that make it necessary to observe time. How is it that we constantly think about time, that time has become part of our conscience? We live constantly in the awareness that it is now 12 o'clock, that it will soon be one o'clock.

We live in an upside-down world. We believe that time is a concept from natural science, and was brought from there into society. But in reality it happened the other way around. Because of social needs in earlier times, priests observed the progression of the moon and the sun in order to indicate planting times, and as people came to live in larger communities, co-ordinated activities were only possible if there was a uniformity of time, if everyone had a watch.

And the result is that everyone has an in-built mechanical clock, which tells you when you have to get out of bed and go to work. Time has become a problem, a repressive authority.

Yes, a problem. We will have to change the formation of conscience. We have not yet learnt to make unemployment meaningful: people still have the ethic that actually I have to get up at seven o'clock, and they feel inferior because they don't have to, not having any work. I, for example, if I feel like it, can stay in bed without bad conscience until eleven o'clock on a Sunday ...

[Ironically]: And Wednesdays? Can you also sleep in until eleven on Wednesdays?

[Ironically]: Um, if I feel it's good for my work I can! [*Laughing*] Yes, I've got a very strong work ethic. And I'm very contented with it, because something comes out of it. But I also think that now that more and more machines and computers are taking over the work done by people, we have to try and make an unemployed life more satisfying and meaningful.

Many people in Europe live in fear of an atomic war. Earlier in the Middle Ages people were threatened by epidemics, the plague, cholera. Now we are threatened by something we have produced ourselves. It seems as if we control the world, but in fact we don't have a grip on it.

Precisely, precisely! We are driven by blind social processes, in which we are trapped through our own actions. Sociology has the task of finding the causes and explanations of those processes, so that we can learn to control those blind social processes better. We have to understand how those processes work, how something comes out of the web of actions that no one intended, so that we can better steer those processes. It's a matter of controlling the uncontrolled.

Sometimes I think everything we control controls us.

[Cries out] There's that basic attitude again – that fundamentally, everything is going the wrong way. In Europe people have given up thinking that things can get better. If I use the word 'progress' here in the Netherlands, people nearly strike me dead. It's not right. You have just plugged the tape recorder into the electric mains – you control the apparatus, not the other way around. We have a water system, we don't have to walk to the well any more. Life is now a lot better, with the increased control of nature.

In Germany, 3,000 babies have died as a result of acid rain.

Yes, that's a poorly researched problem; we have to do research into it to control it. You contradict yourself. [Provocatively]: Again and again that basic attitude comes up, of hating the present!

Hate? Not at all, I like the world.

One wouldn't think so. Outside your own territory perhaps, you like Latin America ...

I like Holland! Really! My question is, have you read much on other cultures, Buddhism for example?

No, that doesn't suit me.

I thought so! [Laughter]

Although I do have an Eastern meditation technique, but then only for purely worldly goals. Meditation often has a very good and useful effect. Without hashish! Have you looked at Eastern cultures?

No, but I have noticed that the writers I like to read have been influenced by that: Doris Lessing, Marguerite Yourcenar [6],[#N6].

Yourcenar, no, I can't read her. How can you like that? In *Hadrianus* people don't come to life, if I compare it to Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*, now that's alive, I like that. [7],[#N7]. Yourcenar, that's too much reflection, too much with the head.

And Borges? Elias Canetti? [8],[#N8]

Borges, I can't read him. Nor Canetti, much too cerebral. I was invited to write something for Canetti's eightieth birthday, but I didn't do it. He's a nice man, but I can't read his work [Laughing]. It's a remarkable paradox that you do like it; we are all full of contradictions.

I'd like to continue with imagination and religion. You once wrote: previously people could not explain many phenomena. Everything they did not understand, they called God.

They were confronted with uncontrollable events. Lightning for example. They couldn't control them, so they projected their fantasy onto them. So you should not interpret magic as simply negative. It protected people against their powerlessness, their helplessness. Now, too, you see many people who need magic against the threat of war. They shout 'Peace, peace', and think that this is how they will bring peace nearer.

But now that people understand and can explain increasingly more events, what significance do you see for fantasy and religion?

[Somewhat evasively]: I'm a sociologist. I can't speak about religion as if it is suspended in mid-air, and can only speak about it in relation to human organisations like churches or sects. You ask me what significance the Catholic or Protestant Church has?

No. Our knowledge of the world has increased, we plan our lives, we become a professor or a journalist, it is no longer God who makes our lives, we make our own lives, we have become little gods ourselves, we create our own friendships and loves. Do you believe that religion, magic and mystery have become superfluous?

I don't know, I don't understand mysteries. If you need emotional fantasies, you're free to use them. I don't need them.

At the moment a lot is being said about the crisis in European culture and its causes.

The European countries have not been able to come to grips with the transition after the Second World War, when they became second-rank powers. But for me it is still an unsolved problem why Europe's military decline should go hand in hand with a cultural decline.

Two causes of the crisis are mentioned: the communications revolution, which Europe is not prepared for, and the splitting of Europe which cut East and West apart.

I don't see it like that, I don't see it like that. It is of course unfortunate that the great Prague cultural tradition, that whole potential of human creativity, no longer blooms. [g].[#Ng]I know myself how hopeless it is when you're talented and you cannot express yourself, it's a dreadful situation. I have a lot of respect for the Polish, the Czech and Russian traditions. But Europe has many branches, and a tree can surely blossom if some branches momentarily don't.

But nothing is blossoming!

The question is what one can do to get Europe blossoming again. I myself am in a remarkable situation ... perhaps because I was born in the previous century and experience everything in a different way, but my

imagination is today still as alive as ever and I'm still full of ideas in my area ... I try to be an example to others, I don't see why things should be suffocating here. The problem is that the Europeans are searching for an identity. They've lost their old identity by making the same mistake as the USA and Russia now make: striving for military power. They've confused military power and creative power. What can we now do to again give Europeans the courage to create? I haven't lost the courage!

In The Loneliness of the Dying [10],[#N10] you described how death has tended to disappear from daily life.

Yes, I've tried to break down that taboo, but it is uncomfortable for many people. Recently a young girl from a magazine came to see me in Bielefeld. She looked at me with wonder in her eyes and asked, 'How did you arrive at the remarkable idea of writing about dying?' For young people death is so far away. On the other hand, there is a lovely remark by Thomas Mann, I believe in *The Magic Mountain*: [11],[#N11]. 'One should not let thoughts of death gain power over one's life', that is also important ...

What I find so paradoxical is that in our culture death is not talked about, we see no dead people; graveyards, crematoria and mortuaries are kept out of sight. But on the televisions in every home there is nothing but violence, murder, war, corpses. It's as if we live in a fiction. The real dead people we don't see; what we do see and what we get used to are the dead people on the screen.

[Pensively]: Yes, what you say is right. Perhaps I'll write a story about it: recently I unexpectedly faced death myself. During a lecture tour in Athens I suddenly fell ill. Actually I stayed alive through a series of lucky coincidences, if I'd gone a few steps further, I'd probably be ... as a human experience it seemed worth writing about. In the end it didn't do me much harm ...

[Laughing]: And now you're sitting here attacking the youth of Europe! ...

At the beginning we talked about projection in politics. Where you also see a lot of projection is between men and women. Men adore women, or look down on them ...

[Interrupting]: They need women!

Yes, that's true at a pragmatic level. But I'm talking about the psychological projection of men and women: girls want a prince, a pretty young man. Men want a whore, a virgin, a mother. Do you see a connection between this sexual projection and political projection?

I don't completely understand. What is your specific problem? What do you mean by projection?

I'm thinking that one of the problems of our Christian culture is that we think in political utopias and also project ideals onto our personal relationships. If you project too much you can't see reality any more.

A minute ago, you have accused me of pragmatism. But what you now say means, translated into my language, we dream too much, and these dreams hinder us in dealing with reality. Yes. I agree with that. That brings me back to your question on religion. For me the same applies there. Our task is to come to grips with reality, not to obscure it with projections. By projecting, reality is closed off. And indeed, perhaps that also applies to the idealised notions men have of women and vice versa.

Seeing reality clearly, constructing our life with each other sensibly, and taking each other's weaknesses into account, that's what it's about. After all, we are all neurotic, a little mad. And patience, patience plays a large part. And if you just have patience with shared insanities, then you can also dream.

'We should not let ourselves be misled' (1987): Interview with Martin-Jochen Schulz

First published as "Man darf sich nicht irre machen lassen": ein Gespräch mit dem neunzigjährigen Norbert Elias', Frankfurter Rundschau, 22 June 1987. Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

You are fond of describing yourself as a 'human scientist'. Why?

One of the curious things I do not understand is that everything we call the 'social sciences' has to do with human beings – that there are always 'human beings' behind the word 'social sciences'. The 'society of individuals' is made up of human beings. [12],[#N12]. Perhaps it makes people uncomfortable to be made the subject matter of science. Many people don't want to be 'known' in that sense.

Who would willingly place himself or herself on a psychologist's couch?

'Psychology' is just a word. People cannot be separated into such factual compartments.

You never did that. You started by studying medicine, but you also studied philosophy and psychology at the same time. That was unusual enough, but still possible at that time (1918). And then you turned to social science.

I never fully understood why something that belongs together in reality should be artificially separated when reflecting upon it. We have to think more intensively about human beings because our slight knowledge of that subject has clearly led us into the dead-end of a possible nuclear war.

So we have learned how to control nature, but not the nature of human beings?

We handle our knowledge of the human plane of nature much less skilfully than our knowledge of non-human nature.

What do you know about the nature of human beings that makes you so sceptical?

I am not sceptical. We know a lot. But I do not think that we are at the end of the journey today. I do not view what we are doing statically – I think in processes. I am not at the end. That is what many people find very difficult – to imagine that after their deaths a world will be there, including a human world, which is quite different to the present one. For many people that is a very unpleasant thought. Today we have basically lost the ability to think of a future. Most people do not want to go beyond their present – they do not like to see themselves as a link in the chain of generations.

Is that easier for you because you have grown up as a man of this century, so to speak, with its extraordinary technical developments and major political and social changes, and its instabilities, whereas today, in our more developed countries, an ever-larger proportion of people no longer perceive the speed of technical development, and are surrounded by relative stability in politics, the economy and society?

That is possible. All the same, why do people find it so difficult to place the limited nature of their own existence clearly and unambiguously in view, to realise that they are a link in a process – not the end? We always speak as if we were standing before absolute ends.

Perhaps human beings are inclined to deal with their affairs pragmatically, and to concentrate any mental powers they have left over on religious and philosophical questions.

There is a category difference here: 'Perhaps *human beings* are inclined ...' You want to disregard the process and argue in terms of human beings. I cannot do that. I can only say that there have been times when the consciousness of a future on this earth was stronger. Today we are largely losing sight of what it is to work towards a future.

Might the reason also be that we ourselves can do so little to shape it?

That is what a 'human scientist', for example, ought to investigate. I believe that one of the reasons for this situation is disappointment with all future-oriented utopias and ideals. A reaction has set in. I call this the retreat of the sociologists, but also – if you like – the 'retreat of human beings' into the present. [13][#N13]. I call it the restriction of thinking to the present. The past is not so important, the future is not so important. Only the immediate present is really important. That is entirely wrong! The present can only be understood as a point in the advance of processes.

After two lost wars it would not really surprise me if the Germans were especially focused on the present.

I may be wrong, but I find it remarkable that Germany has actually emerged relatively intact from the two defeats. It seems to me that people have not lost the courage to live.

Undoubtedly not. But the consciousness of a national identity has been damaged.

That is correct. But perhaps it is also a European development. Something I often think is that, fundamentally, the British suffer far more from the loss of past greatness than the Germans.

The reason may be that Great Britain really was a world power. I'd like to come back to the topic of 'national identity', which is so difficult for us Germans. The young people who, of course, are especially important to the shaping of the future, do not want to know much about our damaged history. What would you advise them, or tell them?

First of all, I would agree with many young people that the established, older generations pay them far too little attention. Politics is so exclusively concerned with short-term economic decisions. Education and training are dreadfully neglected. The riches I received at my German *Gymnasium* seventy or eighty years ago are not available to the youth of today. I am ninety and have not lost courage. Today, many young people are already beginning to lose courage. But that is not their fault. That is the fault of a society that gives them few opportunities.

Is that perhaps also an answer to the question of what preconditions must be created to enable young people to begin coming to terms with our difficult national past?

Exactly that!

Are you an ethicist?

No. I have difficulty with the traditional concepts.

Yet you do challenge people to change their actions.

But not on the basis of eternal principles. That is implicit in the word ethics.

Is it really? Or only as a result of the burden of history?

Perhaps. For me it is important how far the identification with other people goes. Earlier, the radius of this identification was much smaller. That also determines actions. Today people are already even speaking of 'human rights'. Whether one likes it or not, for the first time it is becoming realistically possible to speak of human rights – not in the idealistic sense, but quite concretely. That is a very hopeful beginning. It is astonishing how people are suddenly realising that human beings have rights as human beings. That is to say that wherever you are, in whatever nation and whatever part of the earth, you may not do this or that to a human being, because he or she is a human being.

A kind of 'principle of responsibility' for others going beyond one's own ego and one's own identity?

Correct. I am rather proud of my idea of the We–I balance. [14],[#N14]. Today we have an enlargement of the we-identity. That has had a historical development. I have demonstrated the more and more pronounced emergence of the we-feeling by the example of the development from tribe to state, from small states to large nations, right up to communities of many states with different goals. On the other side, we also have a retreat to the 'I'. I earlier called this *homo clausus*. I now call it the 'we-less I'. [15],[#N15]. We should not let ourselves be misled. The important thing is which of these directions becomes dominant.

In spring you published a volume of poems. [16],[#N16]

Some things that I can express only with difficulty in my scientific work, I am well able to express as a poet. It is good if one has the strength to do both.

On page 72 there is a didactic poem (Lehrgedicht), which includes the following text:

*'... zu singen und zu sagen
muß man ein Neues wagen
was ungewiß ertragen
riskieren und sich plagen
muß suchen und versagen
erfinden und ertragen
das hat uns frei gemacht ...'*

[To sing and give voice we must venture the new, endure the uncertain, risk and take pains, seek and founder, invent and endure – that has made us free.]

Is that what you say?

Yes!

Endure the uncertain?

Yes!

Risk?

Yes! Constantly, as a scientist.

Invent?

Exactly! As a scientist one might say 'discover'.

Take pains?

Quite certainly!

And that has made you free?

Yes!

'In reality, we are all late barbarians' (1989): Interview with Helmut Hetzel

First published as 'Norbert Elias: Im Grunde sind wir alle späte Barbaren', Die Welt, 11 December 1989. Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

In your main work, 'On the Process of Civilisation', you analysed the process of civilisation in the West. Are human beings today more civilised or more barbaric than one hundred years ago?

That question is too simple for me. The theory of civilisation shows that one can never speak of an absolute state of being civilised or of an absolute state of being uncivilised, but only of stages of civilisation. The idea that there were ever uncivilised human beings is just as false as the idea that one day there might be absolutely civilised human beings. All that can be observed are changeable relationships of equilibrium between more or less civilised tendencies of self-regulation. But, undoubtedly, the self-regulation of human beings in complex industrialised states is more pervasive and more uniform than in simpler societies.

So what would this ideal, typical specimen of a perfectly civilised human individual look like?

It doesn't exist.

Why not?

I repeat: for me these simple alternatives do not exist. We are dealing with a process. Human beings can become *more* civilised, but never perfect.

How does this process of civilisation proceed among human beings?

Over many stages; it is always in progress. One criterion for it is the level of socially permitted violence. In the more developed societies today it happens relatively infrequently that a man beats his wife and children, and it arouses revulsion. In the Middle Ages the use of violence in families was far more normal. But processes of civilisation do not take place in a vacuum. They occur, for example, in conjunction with processes of state formation. The development of the German state in relatively recent times is an example of how overheated conflicts within and between states can lead to a rise in the level of violence, and thus to an abrupt shift in the direction of decivilisation.

How do you assess this process of state development in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany?

It is evolving. I am not yet quite clear in my own mind how this development is actually progressing. At present one cannot foresee what influence Europe, the formation of an internal market, will have. The surrendering of functions to Brussels represents a new level of self-control. This self-control is now demanded of German authorities. That automatically means a transition to a higher level of integration – and to a need to develop one's own self-regulation accordingly.

Does this need for more self-restraint and self-regulation apply to the general public as well as to the government?

Yes. It takes some time for the level of self-regulation to adapt itself to the level of integration on a higher, European plane. But you can see from this example how civilisational and state developments go hand-in-hand.

In this connection, does the change in East–West relations associated with the name of Gorbachev [17],[#N17] make you feel hopeful?

It is characteristic of Gorbachev that he knows that this will be a slow process of transformation, because the habitus of the Russian populace can adapt only slowly to this change. Earlier it was thought that what we do is simply rational. But I do not place much value on the concept of rationality, because the whole drive economy, the whole of self-regulation, are always involved in human actions. Feelings, too – and not just a machine we call ‘reason’. Gorbachev knows very well that things have to move slowly, that reforms cannot be rushed. The human machinery of drive-regulation cannot perform such readjustments at one stroke.

What chances of success do you give the reform movements taking place in the USSR, Poland, Hungary and now in the GDR? Is socialism actually capable of being reformed?

Offhand, I would say: fifty-fifty. The chance that these movements will fail is still 50 per cent; everything is up in the air at present. All the same, we should do all we can to support these movements. It would be terrible for all of us if Gorbachev failed with his reforms and things reverted to the Brezhnev system or a new Stalinism.

In sociological theory you are regarded as an independent mind. You do not subscribe to the Marxist, positivist or system-theory schools. Will the crisis of socialism now taking place in practice also have negative effects on the influence of Marxist theory in your field? After the atrocities of Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Tse-tung and Deng Xiaoping, has Marxist theory finally lost all credibility?

Yes. But I would like to distinguish between two things. Marx has left behind a work that in certain respects goes beyond Hegel. It was a major achievement to discover that economic processes have a great influence on cultural processes. From a purely scientific point of view, therefore, it cannot be denied that Marx achieved something that has pushed our knowledge forward by a few points. But if you ask whether the Marxian prophecy, as a political programme, has been shipwrecked, I would say, yes, Marx’s prediction on the future has lost a great deal of credibility.

Will that have effects on the overall credibility of Marxian theory and its reception within scholarship in general?

The black-and-white caricature: ‘We are good, you are bad’, may have its place in the nursery. Among adults this attitude has no place on a relatively elevated level of civilisation. One cannot say: ‘Marxism bad, Thatcherism good’. That would not be adequate to reality. But what is clear is that Marxism has been shipwrecked as a political programme. I have long known that this economic, monocausal theory is a simplification of reality.

Let’s go back to your own theory on the process of civilisation. When we see how humanity is in the process of destroying its environment and its conditions of life today, the possibility of progress within the process of civilisation seems, to say the least, very questionable. Is there such a thing as progress in the civilisation of humanity?

Our traditional conceptual apparatus is not adequate to reality. One cannot speak of progress in general, but of particular instances of progress in certain areas – for example, progress in combating epidemics, in child nutrition, in granting equal status to women and men, in home decor or in transport technology.

But technology and its accomplishments are a two-edged sword, are they not? Technology can have positive and negative consequences.

You are right. People today are ruthlessly destroying their own habitation. That must be regarded as one of the unplanned consequences of planned actions. That happens again and again. Of course, people have not planned to destroy their environment. That is an unplanned and unwanted by-product of actions with other objectives. That was not foreseeable.

Is not the felling of the tropical rain forests in Brazil a planned action?

Certainly, that is a planned action. But what is planned in the first place is to use the timber. What is not planned is to threaten humanity by doing so. There simply are different human interests. Some people want timber and others come along and say, 'you are destroying the rain-forest'. It is our task to correct the unacceptable consequences of planned actions with as much equanimity and patience as possible. In Germany today there is, for understandable reasons, a strong tendency to deny all progress and to stress only the evils of our time. That is just as wrong and dangerous as the tendency to see only progress and to shut one's eyes to the evils.

Is there any way out of the dilemma that economic actions often destroy the environment? Will there one day be an ecologically-oriented economy?

On that question I am not one hundred per cent optimistic. For example, the resistance of Brazilian agrarian interests and their power is so great that it is not yet clear which side will prevail.

So is there a way out of the dilemma I indicated?

The power relationships need to be examined in more detail. What means of exerting power and pressure still need to be used in order to hold back industrial societies when their products threaten the living space of humanity, and to induce these agrarian and industrial circles, with their short-term thinking, to think differently? I believe that the Greens are on the right track in this respect. But only in this respect. Not with regard to what they think. I wish the Greens might re-examine their ideologies.

Are you a Green, Professor?

No. I am not politically engaged. I believe that would be in contradiction to my scientific tasks. What matters to me is to see reality without embellishment, and to make it accessible without embellishment to others.

Do mean that there is such a thing as a neutral science?

Do you mean a non-political science?

All right, let's say a non-political science.

That does exist. I will go still further: I consider that scientists who are politically engaged very often give a false picture of reality.

How has the process of civilisation actually affected the relations of the sexes to one another, the relationship of man and woman?

It is a fact that the emancipation of women has now advanced a long way, at least in Europe. I can only marvel at the change in the social standing of women that has occurred in Europe. The whole life of women has changed fundamentally.

Please put that in concrete terms.

To stay within the terminology of my theory: I see it as an unplanned consequence of planned actions. In addition, the increasing internal pacification of European state societies has increasingly deprived men of their principal means of enforcing their power in relation to women, the use of physical violence – or even just the ability to threaten violence.

Many women, and quite certainly the feminists, would see that differently.

The change in the status of women is bound up, among other things, with a change in the balance of power between parents and children. Earlier, children were utterly dependent on the support of their family in seeking a profession or marrying. Today, to take just one instance, children are able to make demands on the state at an early stage, for example for educational grants. So they are independent of their parents relatively early. That has contributed greatly to the emancipation of unmarried daughters. We are dealing here with a relocation of certain educational functions which were earlier performed by the parents and now by the state. Whether that will remain the case I do not know.

In the course of European unification there is repeated talk of a Social Charter. That is demanded especially by President Mitterrand. [18][#N18] It is argued that the welfare state should become European. Do you see a likelihood of such a welfare state?

I believe that the unification of Europe is another very slow process. All social strata in Europe, in all states, are dependent on one another. In the long run, none of these states can tolerate enclaves of poverty. Such enclaves represent a fatal squandering of sources of social wealth. No less disastrous is the narrowing of education. For the economy, too, it is important that the coming European generations have a broad educational horizon. In the developed industrial societies, the interdependence of all social strata is too great to leave room for wide differences in the standard of living.

Campaigning for human rights, too, is not simply a pursuit of ideals. It has a very practical meaning in the context of increasing interdependence. People who make their contribution to the total achievement of humanity mainly under the pressure of fear contribute only a minimum of what they could contribute to the total good of humanity if they were able to act primarily from understanding, and relatively free of fear. Do we not all know that dictators, who rule by terror and fear, uselessly squander human lives?

President George Bush [19][#N19] has predicted that the Iron Curtain will fall, the division of Europe can be overcome and a rapprochement between Western and Eastern Europe will come about. Has a cohesive, frontierless, total Europe, including the parts called Western and Eastern Europe today, become thinkable again?

Possible, yes, but not certain. Here, too, it is the case that everything is in flux. And it partly depends on us, on those living now, whether the rudder is pulled in this direction or that. But it is possible that a market economy will establish itself in the East as well, and that the whole Eastern ideology will become more peaceable.

What effects could that have on the German question, on divided Germany?

I cannot foresee that, of course. But I do believe that the present relationship between the Federal Republic and the GDR will change. The last word on that has not yet been spoken. There are many possibilities. There is the possibility of a special relationship, which absolutely ensures that Germans do not need to fight against Germans, an atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill. One nation in two systems, perhaps. [20][#N20]

You know, Austria is also a German state. It sounds somewhat peculiar today to say that under the Habsburgs Vienna functioned as the capital of Germany. What is at issue today is the relationship of the Federal Republic

to other German-speaking regions, for example Austria, but also to the GDR and the German-speaking regions in Switzerland. The cultural interchange between the German-speaking regions of Europe is still very lively. It ought to be cultivated.

Would it be conceivable for you that the relationship between the two German states would one day resemble that between the Netherlands and Belgium, which did, of course, belong together for a long period, and between the Federal Republic and Austria today? Or are those just two of many options?

Yes. One has to ask oneself: What is desirable and what is possible? But to do this a scientific attitude of the kind I just described is necessary. Scientific research is unproductive if it allows itself to be influenced by party-political preferences, or even propaganda.

Research without blinkers, or, to express it in the terminology of your theory, attaining knowledge through drive control?

Precisely – drive control which is not dominated by passion. One might also talk of serenity. What is needed is self-critical reflection on one's own standpoint.

Reflection as a principle of civilisation?

Yes, that certainly bears witness to a very elevated stage of civilisation. Serenity, patience and tolerance in people's dealings with one another.

Which also includes respect for one's political opponent.

Opponents are not always political, of course. That, too, is a remnant of an old way of thinking. Perhaps one should think more about how one can collaborate with people who hold different opinions.

But you cannot deny the existing conflicts of interests and ideologies.

Certainly not. There have been conflicts of interest and ideological struggles in all societies up to now. As a sociologist I am familiar with them. But I am equally familiar with the fact that people can manage their conflicts of interest in very different ways – with hatred, bitterness and the desire to utterly crush their social opponents, or by recognising the concurrent and communal nature of opposed interests, and therefore with willingness to make compromises.

Humanity is still in the early phase of its development. That we still play with the possibility of war is thoroughly barbaric. In relation to the epoch in which we live, we are late barbarians.

When will humanity have shaken off barbarism once and for all?

In the next five hundred years we have an opportunity to work and struggle for the increasing civilisation of human beings.

If we do not destroy ourselves first, do you mean?

Yes, we are living in a very perilous time. We are close to the edge of the abyss

And what is the greatest threat to us?

People's lack of understanding for the fundamental structures of their own fate, their unwillingness to look themselves in the eye without a mask. Don't forget that people always skirt around the abyss. Up to now they have behaved like the rider on Lake Constance. [21].[#N21]I may fall ill, I may have an accident, I may be attacked by a madman. We are all fragile. And just as fragile are human societies. But there are still chances of averting disaster.

You have not quite answered the question. In your opinion, what is the greatest threat to humanity?

There are many mortal dangers. One of them is nuclear war, one is the ozone hole. Another is religious and nationalist fanaticism, the blind incomprehension of established groups for the concerns of outsiders. We cannot overcome these dangers without a pronounced reduction in hostility between human beings. And no one can predict whether some implacable politician like Hitler or Khomeini [22],[#N22], will not escalate these dangers to the point where they are out of control.

Your main work, 'On the Process of Civilisation' ...

Forgive me, but I do not think that is my main work. I have published a number of research studies. How these works will be regarded later I cannot foresee. The process of civilisation is only one strand in a more comprehensive work.

That strand of your total work came out early, in 1939 in Switzerland, was republished in 1969 in the Federal Republic, and did not attract a wider readership until the mid-1970s. Even colleagues like Habermas and Luhmann ignored you for a long time. How do you explain that? Are you offended by it?

No, not in the slightest. I have a very high regard for Habermas and Luhmann. But we lack a common basis for discussion. In my works I have said a lot of new things. And I am aware that real innovations take a long time to be assimilated. But I'm glad that my work seems to be starting to find acceptance. I consider my little work on symbols, which came out only this year, to be just as important as my theory of civilisation. [23],[#N23] A book on established and outsiders will appear shortly. [24],[#N24] The established-outsidere theory also seems to me a very fertile one.

When can we expect this new publication to come out in the Federal Republic?

Next year, I hope. From Suhrkamp.

On the occasion of your ninetieth birthday you even published a volume of poetry. Is poetry a logical continuation of scientific work, for you?

No, it is a matter of equilibrium. After spending a long time working on a scientific text it is very nice to occupy oneself with a poem. It is a different activity, a relaxing one. It also demands concentration, creates tension, but is relaxing as well. I'm very happy that the poetry volume has come out. It includes some very good German poems, I believe. I do not know whether they are already attracting notice in schools. But I could imagine that some of them will one day be adopted in the general stock of school poetry. [25],[#N25]

Today, admittedly, taking pleasure in poetry is restricted to very small circles in Germany. The sharp reaction against German classicism, against the time when the Germans legitimised themselves as a nation of poets and thinkers, no doubt plays a part in this.

Professor Elias, are you a happy person?

Yes, I am happy, because I have in some measure performed the task I set myself. And I am very happy that today, at my age, I am still able to work at full strength.

Notes

1. Elias is referring to his 'Notes on a lifetime', first published in German in Peter Gleichmann, Johan Goudsblom and Hermann Korte (eds), *Macht und Zivilisation: Materialien zu Norbert Elias's*

- Zivilisationstheorie 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 9–82. Revised text forthcoming in Elias, *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections* (Dublin: UCD Press, forthcoming 2013). – SJM [♣.\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. See Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 3]); *The Court Society* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2006 [Collected Works, vol. 2]); *What is Sociology?*, enlarged edition (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 5]); *The Established and the Outsiders* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 4]); *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 7]); *An Essay on Time* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]). – SJM [♣.\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
 3. Ronald Reagan (1911–2004), President of the United States 1981–89, used the term ‘the evil empire’ to describe the Soviet Union in a speech in Florida on 8 March 1983. – SJM [♣.\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
 4. See Norbert Elias, ‘On nature’, in *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 14]), pp. 53–65. – SJM [♣.\[#N4-ptri\]](#)
 5. Norbert Elias, *An Essay on Time* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 9]). – SJM [♣.\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
 6. Novelists Doris Lessing (1919–), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, and Marguerite Yourcenar (1903–87), who in 1980 became the first woman elected to the Académie Française. – SJM [♣.\[#N6-ptri\]](#)
 7. Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d’Hadrian* (Paris: Plon, 1951); *Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. Grace Frick (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955); Robert Graves, *I Claudius* (London: Arthur Barker, 1934). – SJM [♣.\[#N7-ptri\]](#)
 8. Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), Argentinian short-story writer, essayist, poet and translator associated with the genre of ‘magical realism’. Elias Canetti (1905–1994), Bulgarian–Swiss novelist and non-fiction writer, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981, whose book *Crowds and Power* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1962) has sometimes been seen to give him something in common with Norbert Elias beyond the shared forename of the one and surname of the other. – SJM [♣.\[#N8-ptri\]](#)
 9. An allusion to the crushing of the liberal communist ‘Prague Spring’ of 1968 by the invading forces of the Warsaw Pact. – SJM [♣.\[#N9-ptri\]](#)
 10. Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, in *The Loneliness of the Dying and Humana Conditio* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 6]), pp. 1–74. – SJM [♣.\[#N10-ptri\]](#)
 11. Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. Helen T. Lowe-Porter, 2 vols (London: Secker & Warburg, 1928). – SJM [♣.\[#N11-ptri\]](#)
 12. See Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 10]). – SJM [♣.\[#N12-ptri\]](#)
 13. Norbert Elias, ‘The retreat of sociologists into the present’, in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 16]), pp. 107–26. – SJM [♣.\[#N13-ptri\]](#)
 14. Norbert Elias, ‘Changes in the We–I balance’, in *The Society of Individuals*, pp. 137–208. – SJM [♣.\[#N14-ptri\]](#)
 15. *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9, 187. *Homo clausus*, ‘closed person’, a key term in Elias’s work, both in his critique of a key assumption of the central tradition of Western philosophy and in his description of a mode of self-experience that became more pronounced and more widespread – as part of the civilising process – from the Renaissance onwards. See especially the Postscript to *On the Process of Civilisation* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 3]), pp. 512–19, 522–6. – SJM [♣.\[#N15-ptri\]](#)
 16. Norbert Elias, *Los der Menschen: Gedichte/Nachdichtungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987); enlarged edn, *Gedichte und Sprüche* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004 [Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 18]). – SJM [♣.\[#N16-ptri\]](#)

17. Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–), General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1985–91, and executive President 1990–1. Despite the failure of an attempted coup d'état against him by communist hardliners, 19–21 August 1991 – just over a year after Elias's death – it led to the end of the communist regime and the break-up of the Soviet Union. – SJM♣.[#N17-ptr1]
18. François Mitterand (1916–96), President of France 1981–95, member of the French Socialist Party. – SJM♣.[#N18-ptr1]
19. George Herbert Walker Bush (1924–), President of the United States, 1989–93. – SJM♣.[#N19-ptr1]
20. This interview was published in *Die Zeit* barely more than a month after the momentous announcement by the GDR government on 9 November 1989 (following several weeks of civil unrest in East Germany) that all its citizens were now permitted to visit West Germany and West Berlin. That led quickly to the piecemeal demolition of the hated Berlin Wall, and then with astonishing speed to the collapse of the East German Communist regime and to the reunification of Germany with effect from 3 October 1990, just two months after Elias's death. But at the time of the interview the future course of events was still quite unclear. – SJM♣.[#N20-ptr1]
21. An allusion to Gustav Schwab's poem 'Der Reiter und der Bodensee', in *Gedichte* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1828), I, pp. 364–6, about a man who rode across the frozen Lake Constance and promptly died of fright when he looked back and saw what he had done. – SJM♣.[#N21-ptr1]
22. Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (1902–89), leader of Iran's Shia Muslims and of the 1979 Iranian Revolution which overthrew the regime of the Shah of Iran. – SJM♣.[#N22-ptr1]
23. It was published in 1989 in four parts in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*; the book itself, with additional material, did not appear (in the original English) until 1991, after Elias's death, and was not published in German translation until 2001. See *The Symbol Theory* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2011 [Collected Works, vol. 13]). – SJM♣.[#N23-ptr1]
24. Elias means it will appear in German translation, as it did in 1990. The original English edition had been published in 1995. See the revised and enlarged edn, *The Established and the Outsiders* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 4]). – SJM♣.[#N24-ptr1]
25. Elias was no doubt setting his sights a little high, though Tabea Dörfelt, rates it highly in her study of his poetry in relation to his academic writings: Tabea Dörfelt, *Dichtung als Menschenwissenschaft: Das poetische Werk von Norbert Elias* (Wiesbaden: Springer-VS, 2013). – SJM♣.[#N25-ptr1]

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