

Sublimating Resentment: Following Elias along Five Paths toward Another Sociology

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ABSTRACT: My hypothesis is that the key position of most of Elias' works is: sublimating resentment. In order to sustain this hypothesis, I develop five key intellectual positions which both define his intellectual style and account for such a sublimation of resentment: the stress on interdependence rather than on domination; on relations rather than on substance; on contexts rather than on general entities; and on analytical description rather than on value judgment. Those five paths may lead us far from present time major trends in sociology.

KEYWORDS: Elias – resentment – sociology - sublimation

1. Sociology rather than resentment

When reading *The Germans* (Elias, 1989) I realized that beyond the many topics of the book, there is a main and basic one, which can be summed up in a few words: social stratification, and the belonging or not to an elite; that is, inclusion in it or exclusion out of it. Most of the chapters address what is both a practical problem for many actors, and a typically sociological issue for social scientists. In particular the pages dedicated to academic clubs and students fraternities, considered by Elias according to this inclusion issue – or rather, exclusion issue, since for him, as a Jew, exclusion from elitist circles must have been a practical problem far before becoming a theoretical issue, as a sociologist.

Then I realized that what seems to be at the core of *The Germans* is also a running topic in most of his books. After all, what is the common point between *The Civilizing Process* (1939), *The Court Society* (1965), *Mozart* (1991), *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965), or even his work on the naval profession (1950) or on the balance of power between sexes (1987) – if it is not the strength of social stratification, the way individuals confront it when engaged in mobility, and the way the structure itself comes to be modified by these efforts to move up? In and out court society for upper classes, in and out the local establishment for lower classes, in and out the aristocratic circles for a genial creator, in and out the privileged strata for future soldiers, or for women...

And by the way, what for Jews?

Reading again *The Germans*, I realized that this word – the very word 'Jew' or 'Jewish' - appears only three or four times in the 430 pages of the book. No more!

Isn't it amazing? Jews are the category *par excellence* who had to suffer from an exclusion problem, especially in Germany. And Elias, the great sociologist who discovered the crucial importance of this dialectics between inclusion and exclusion not only for individuals, but also for societies as a whole; Elias, the Jew who himself suffered humiliation – see his life history – because of his exclusion from students fraternities as a young

man, and then from the anti-Semitism of the German academic system; Elias, the Jew who had to leave his country because of the Nazi racial policy, and whose mother was murdered in Auschwitz – Elias hardly mentioned the issue of Judaism in his book on the German ethos. Not any more, by the way, than in his other works.

Isn't it amazing indeed?

Such a silence says something, obviously. I may be wrong, but what it says, in my eyes – at least what it says to me – is that this issue, instead of being *somewhere* in his work, is just *everywhere*. It is the starting point, the invisible foundation of his whole work: both its central issue – how to deal with inclusion and exclusion when you are Jewish – and the central problem of the man who created that work. So deep and painful, this problem, that it could not be addressed directly, explicitly; and at the same time, so deep and powerful that it could constitute the starting point and the constant guide of an exceptional work.

Avoiding direct confrontation with a trauma while using it in order to feed one's creation: this process is exactly what Sigmund Freud described and conceptualized as *sublimation*.

Yes, I think that Elias's work is an enormous, fantastic piece of sublimation of this very problem: how to be a Jew *inside* a non-Jewish, and even anti-Semitic society. Once displaced onto various areas, and first of all onto court societies, it has become the systematic study of how a society comes to change because of the efforts of certain categories to move into social stratification, in order to obtain inclusion into upper levels when coming from lower levels; and how these changes in the social structure affect individual lives at the most intimate strata of experience.

Of course, there could have been other ways to deal with this trauma. It could have been repressed, so that nothing would come out of it but neurosis or even psycho; or it could have been transformed into resentment, anger, perpetual accusations against tormentors or complaints about one's sufferings as a victim. But no such things with Elias: no repression, no resentment – just silence about Jews inside an enormous work about the basic condition of Jews when trying to integrate an anti-Semitic society, out and in, in and out, down and up, up and down, with such severe difficulties for no other reason than being born where you were born.

This is why I think that his whole work is a huge, magnificent process of social sublimation, a way to avoid both repression and resentment by creating a genial renewal of a young intellectual discipline: sociology. Exactly as Mozart, being born with exceptional talent but excluded from the upper strata of society, avoided both repression and resentment by creating a genial renewal of music. This way to build up a powerful sociological issue out of a traumatic social and personal problem is the first path that takes away from resentment while getting closer to a new sociology.

Now I would like to read this intellectual achievement at the light of my hypothesis: how a hyper-sensitiveness to the issue of inclusion-exclusion and to the modelling of social stratification opened up some other paths towards fundamental changes in the way to conceive sociology. Namely: contextualisation rather than generalisation; interdependence rather than domination; relations rather than objects; and analysis rather than value judgment.

2. Contextualisation rather than generalisation

German sociology has long been conceived – and continues to be conceived – as what in French would rather be called 'philosophie du social' - a philosophy of society. This means general statements about general issues,

rather than empirical studies of contextual phenomena; and a tendency toward global theories rather than a variety of conceptual tools allowing comparisons between various situations.

This trend towards generalisation can also be met in other national traditions, of course: one could find it in Talcott Parsons' work in the US (1939), or in Gurvitch's work in France (1950), among many other possible examples. But in Germany, instead of being somehow outdated, it still remains the major way to conceive sociology (the most "legitimate" one, as Bourdieu would have put it): the names of Habermas (1981) and Luhmann (1984) suffice to exemplify this phenomenon. Given such a strong trend in German sociology, it is all the more noticeable that Elias always made up his own sociology – without any exception – out of his observation of precise, local contexts, which allowed him to discover and analyze much more general phenomena. His sociology is indeed, first of all, a contextualized sociology: generalisation always comes after, as well as theories come after the facts. This is why Elias is a genuine, an absolute sociologist, and not a philosopher who came to think about social issues. And he perfectly knew it – be it but because he had to pay a high price for this choice in his academic career.

Once again, this choice to observe local contexts rather than to build up general theories is obvious in *The Germans*. Here, one cannot find any vague considerations on "the spirit of a nation", any *a priori* beliefs in the nature of a collective psychology; but a precise analysis of the tensions between fractions, of their history, their causes and consequences on mentalities. No doubt this has to do with the urgent need to understand the general basis of one's precise and never resolved experience: that of exclusion when trying to be included, that of the invisible, but nonetheless all-powerful strength of social stratification.

Elias' use of history has to be considered in the light of this close bond between the need to understand one's personal experience and the will to construct knowledge out of it. Temporal contexts, as well as spatial or cultural contexts – which Elias conceptualized through one of his major contributions to sociology, the notion of 'figuration' – are the very conditions through which building up a general explanation out of a particular experience rather than abstract theorisations.

Let us come now to a third path: interdependence rather than domination.

3. Interdependence rather than domination

One should expect that a man who had to suffer from exclusion would develop a strong resentment against any kind of domination, and, as a sociologist, a tendency to focus on such an issue in his work. This was precisely the case with Pierre Bourdieu, due to his rather low social origin, as he himself stated in his autobiography (2004). And it was probably also the case with Michel Foucault, due to his homosexuality. Both insisted in their work – each one in his own way – on the strength of social domination, be it that of upper classes or that of 'State' or 'Power'.

But it was not the case with Elias. Instead, he showed the way – quite an original way indeed – towards another possible description of human relations in a strongly hierarchical stratification: a description through the notion of interdependence rather than domination. This, I think, is a major turn in the social sciences, which we have just begun to explore yet. And we owe it to Elias and his incredible capacity to overcome resentment through conceptual achievement.

The issue of interdependence is particularly relevant when dealing with an issue that appeared recently in German and French philosophy and sociology: that of *recognition*, as explored by Axel Honneth (1992) and some other scholars after him. Why have social sciences so rarely addressed recognition as a specific issue, that is, as a goal in itself for the actors and a matter of personal identity and social interdependence, rather

than as a matter of power-relations among others, or a mere step in the search for prestige or “distinction”, as in Bourdieu’s model (1979)? One reason might be that the study of recognition necessitates a major paradigm shift away from the theories of economic or political domination that are the legacy of Marx, Bourdieu (1993) and Foucault (1975), toward theories of interdependence. From this perspective, search for material profits, or even search for domination, are no longer the only, nor even the most important keys to understanding human behaviour.

In Bourdieu’s theory of legitimisation (1979), recognition tends to be reduced to a ‘domination effect’. Having first relied on Max Weber’s comprehensive perspective (1920), and on Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in order to take a stand against Marxist reductionism for the purpose of making visible the search for prestige or ‘symbolic profits’, Bourdieu later increasingly reduced the need for recognition to a struggle for ‘status’, or status distinction. In addition, he reduced the capacity to recognize others to a ‘symbolic power’ of ‘legitimation’. Such a conception matches the critical basis of his theory of domination, as well as Foucault’s critiques of ‘power’ as expressed in his study of prison (1975), in that it reduces power to the imposition of a unique norm, and distinction to the will to improve one’s worth, to overshadow someone else, to climb to an undeserved position. This critical view of the search for recognition is both that of the actors, who tend to denounce the need for recognition as an expression of one’s dependence on other people’s opinions or as a manifestation of narcissism; and it is also that of many sociologists, as evidenced in the concepts of domination and legitimisation. This seems to be part of the reasons why social scientists were so long prevented from taking recognition issues into account, as Tzvetan Todorov has aptly observed (1995).

Rather than being addressed through the critical concepts of legitimisation and distinction, strongly linked to the concept of domination, the issue of recognition, with its rich sociological extensions, should instead be addressed according to the concept of interdependence. I personally met this issue in my work on literary and scientific prizes. Any prize winner deeply depends both on the juries and on their peers’ judgement about the quality of their work and person, just as well as any jury depends on the artists’ or scientists’ judgements about the quality of its choices. We certainly depend on those who have the power to recognize us, but this power is itself subordinate to our capacity to recognize it as relevant. This is why Elias’ conception of interdependence – though not very ‘politically correct’ in present-day sociology - appears much more appropriate to address the issue of recognition than the unilateral concepts of ‘power’, ‘domination’ and ‘legitimation’.

Furthermore, this notion of interdependence, combined with that of internalized constraints, allows to escape the binary opposition between ‘individuals’ and ‘society’ (quite a metaphysical opposition, as demonstrated in *The Society of Individuals*, 1987b), in order to understand precisely the moves between the individual and the collective dimensions of psychic, bodily, emotional determinations. This brings us to a fourth path toward a new sociology: the focus on relations rather than objects.

4. *Relations rather than objects*

Resentment implies focusing on ‘bad’ objects. Elias could have spent his intellectual energy in an endless struggle against his enemies, in whatever way he would have identified them. Instead, he completely abandoned the object-oriented perspective and turned to what is really at stake when trying to challenge social stratification in order to get inclusion inside a desired group: that is, *relations* between individuals; relations between insiders and outsiders, be they noble people within a court, artists among nobles, poor newcomers in front of already established poor, Jewish students trying to find a place among Christian students, or else wealthy Jews aspiring to be accepted inside bourgeois German society.

Relations rather than objects: this of course is a major shift in sociology, and I think it is another splendid way to overcome resentment while constructing a quite original way to practice our discipline. It is, no doubt, one of Elias's main teachings (1970): oppositions between discrete categories – as, for instance, 'individual' and 'collective' – are relevant only on a conceptual ground: as soon as one takes them for real entities, they become but metaphysics. By reifying concepts, one constructs distinct categories, turning into separate and discontinuous entities something that exists only as orientating poles, kinds of cardinal points describing movements on a more continuous axis. Elias never ceased to set himself up against these 'conceptual oppositions', which manufacture artificial borders, and thus aporias, such as the false problem of the connection between these categories, or the endless squabbling about their prioritisation.

This of course is not only a sociological issue, but also a philosophical one, since it is closely related to substantialism. Substantialism, no doubt, is one of the worst enemies of Eliasian sociology. I suggest that it is not only for intellectual reasons, but also for moral reasons, since it means attaching phenomena to fixed essences, exactly as anti-Semitism attaches individuals to fixed categories, from which they are forbidden to escape.

Instead, Elias organised his whole reflection on the choice to think not anymore in terms of distinct states, but of continuous processes – the very term 'process' being, as you all know, a key one in his sociology (1939). In this perspective, civilization is in no way an essence nor a substance nor any kind of metaphysical entity. It is not even a state of things, but a move on a continuum between two opposite poles, two trends. Then what has to be explained is not change, but immobility, not the flux of more or less rapid processes, but their stabilisation and 'formalisation' – another key concept - in institutions, habits, laws and rules of all kinds. This shift from a somehow Aristotelian way to put things to a rather Heraclitean one is, no doubt, an intellectual revolution – a kind of Copernician revolution, as Elias himself declared (1987b) – so profound that a vast majority of our colleagues, I'm afraid, have not even identified nor, least of all, understood it.

I do not think that this resistance is only a matter of intellectual rigidity. It is also, I guess, because those who have always perceived themselves as protected by well-established positions can only accept with difficulty that these positions might not be protected by definite, essential, forever fixed states of things, but depend on moving processes. It seems that the 'established' (1965) have a social interest in intellectual substantialism, whereas outsiders have a social and moral interest in processual thinking, which may help them conceptualize their hope to escape, one day, their destiny of exclusion. Once more, a major shift in sociology has been obtained by transforming the social experience of exclusion into an intellectual ability to consider the dimensions of reality that foster historical and social change.

5. Neutral analysis rather than normativity

The fifth and last path leading from resentment to sociological innovation has to do with Max Weber's famous lesson (1951) about axiological neutrality, or value freedom, in scholarly work: a lesson that Elias beautifully appropriated and transformed into his well-known opposition between 'involvement' and 'detachment'. Obviously, someone who would use sociology – or any kind of intellectual discipline – in order to, as we say in French, *régler ses comptes* [settle one's accounts], that is fight against one's enemies, would spontaneously implement a normative stand, namely a conception of sociology as a tool to dismiss, to denounce, to criticize; and not only criticize the other scholars' concepts or analysis – which I think is more than legitimate: necessary – but also criticize the actors' conceptions – which I think is stupid, since it definitely prevents us from understanding them and finding out their meaning and necessity for the actors themselves.

Conversely, one who would use sociology in order to justify or establish one's social position will probably try to highlight the causes and reasons of social stratification as it is, in order to have it considered as the only rational way to organize society. Very roughly speaking, we have here two opposite conceptions of the sociologist's role: one critical, the other one conservative. Nonetheless they have in common that they take for granted that sociologists have to help edict norms, justify actual or future orders, or even play a role as opinion leaders. After the sixties, the critical position became much more prominent than the conservative one, at least in France, where Foucault and Bourdieu became the heroes of social activism, especially at the end of their lives – as if their tremendous intellectual achievement were definitely unable to protect them against the poison of resentment (Heinich 2007).

This critical conception of sociology as a 'sport de combat' – a kind of boxing ring – is presently so strong in my country that it is extremely difficult to plea for a return to Weber's value freedom without being stigmatized as a dangerous 'néo-réactionnaire'. And of course, such a sociological mood does not facilitate the perception of Elias as a great and innovative sociologist: a lot of people have read him but, I'm afraid, very few really understood him, because to understand him one has to consider that criticism is neither the major nor the final task of sociology.

Instead, Elias brilliantly demonstrated that historical deconstruction may be used not in order to dismiss ordinary conceptions, but in order to better describe, explain and understand reality; and that sociology as a whole may be a powerful instrument to free oneself not so much from actual social determinations as from the temptation to let your social problems determine, define and enclose everything in your life, including your intellectual and professional achievements. Instead, Elias succeeded in freeing himself from the risk of social resentment. And doing so, he also succeeded in freeing sociology from some major intellectual traps. That is the final victory of a Jewish outsider in the German academic system. And our very presence at a conference, 115 years exactly after his birth, testifies for this victory.

Biography

Nathalie Heinich, a sociologist, is a research director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS); she works within the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). Besides numerous articles in academic and cultural journals, she has published about thirty books dealing with the status of artists and authors, contemporary art, identity, the history of sociology and, more recently, values.

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