

# Editor's Introduction: Reflections on Global Power Relations

Volume 4, Issue 2: *Reflections on Global Power Relations*, March 2015

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0004.201> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0004.201>]

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Unlike many other schools of sociology, 'figurational' or 'process sociology' has a reputation for a certain reluctance to comment publicly on matters of current political controversy. This is partly a function of the distinctive degree of intergenerational continuity which diverges from the wider pattern of non-cumulative sociological thought (Liston 2011). 'Figurati' have been, and remain, acutely concerned about the importance of a relatively detached approach to sociology, one that seeks to maintain some necessary distance from the dominant ideologies and behaviour of the time and the associated tendency to reinvent the wheel. The general argument is that programmes of action that are ideological and short-term in nature and perspective will continue to produce the kinds of unintended consequences that lie at the heart of problems associated with human co-existence on the planet.

The dual sensitivity to developmental and present-centred axes rests principally on the key process-sociology concepts of figuration and power, and an appreciation of the ways in which the outcomes of social action always and inevitably generate consequences which are both predictable and unplanned. As Elias put it, 'today it is still somewhat difficult to convey the depth of the dependence of people on each other' (2010: 28). He went on:

That the meaning of everything a person does lies in what she or he means to others, not only to those now alive but also to coming generations, that he or she is dependent on the continuation of human society through generations, is certainly one of the most fundamental of human mutual dependences, *those of future on past, of past on future, human beings* (op cit, emphasis added).

At first glance then, the pursuit of relatively detached developmental analyses seems at odds with policy-oriented problems of the kind seen in mainstream sociology and displayed on numerous media channels on a daily basis. 'Figurati' are, of course, greatly influenced by Elias's conception of the involvement–detachment balance. However Elias himself recognised that, after making the necessary 'detour via detachment', there still remained scope for 'secondary re-involvement'. It is along these lines that figurational sociologists, and those utilising the general approach, have maintained a keen and comparatively quiet interest in world history. Yet there are precedents from de Swaan, Spierenburg, Clement, Lever, Quilley and others for speaking out on some public affairs. Certainly figurational-informed work contains ideas of great relevance to current world politics, and knowledge of these ideas might improve the means of orientation available to practising politicians and the many others involved in some way in policy-related problems.

If there is one issue of *Human Figurations* that could be positioned as something of a 'reinvolved' and public sociology then perhaps this is it. The issue is built around a major essay by Stephen Mennell, in which he applies the theory of established–outsider relations to the Ukraine crisis of 2014, developing a perspective that may well be controversial on three counts. Not only does he seek to kick over the traces of figurational orthodoxy by trying to present an example of secondary re-involvement but he uses Elias's ideas to clarify a

highly controversial matter of current geopolitics. The subject matter is also likely to stir emotions in America, a continent that remains relatively barren ground for figurational ideas. Continuing the historical theme and its relevance to modern day politics are two reflections on American power, its uses and abuses, by Bruce Mazlish and Michael Mann. Mazlish shows that only now are historians freeing themselves from a Eurocentric perspective. He uses brief case studies to highlight the largely successful adoptions of 'modernity' by Japan, China and Turkey, and its rejection in the Arab Middle East where a void was filled by global 'Jihadism'. He predicts that where a rejection of 'the modern' continues, particularly in the Middle East, poverty and weakness will be ensured for the people of the area. Following Mazlish's work is Mann's, 'Incoherent Empire revisited', described by one reviewer as persuasive in a truly Machiavellian way. In it, he retains the bias against interventionism which he revealed in *Incoherent Empire*. His arguments, too, may not be appreciated in the United States, he continues to call for Western intervention to be confined to economic aid because the military power of the US cannot achieve goals that are essentially political. This thematic issue concludes with a re-examination of the involvement-detachment problem by Portuguese scholar André Saramago, mainly from a philosophical perspective.

In all four papers, there is a commendable commitment to the generation and analysis of knowledge about the long-term development of humanity and the webs of interdependence woven between people. Thank you to the contributors of this special thematic issue for their stimulating contributions and for embodying the quest to consider the broadest questions associated with human co-existence. Let the heated discussions begin!

Dr. Katie Liston

Editor

## References

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644