

Problems of Orientation and Control: Marx, Elias and the Involvement–Detachment Balance in Figurational Sociology

André Saramago

ABERYSTWYTH UNIVERSITY

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

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0004.205> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0004.205>]

 [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>]

Abstract: *Norbert Elias frequently describes figurational sociology as an attempt to produce more reality-congruent ‘means of orientation’ that might help people acquire greater ‘control’ over their social processes. This paper addresses the important theme of ‘control’ in figurational sociology by arguing that Elias does not provide a satisfactory justification of why control should be privileged by figurational sociologists as one of the goals of social scientific endeavour, nor does he adequately address the political implications of this normative stance. The paper attempts to clarify Elias’s notion of, and attributed value to, ‘control’, through a reinterpretation of Karl Marx’s work that shows the connection between Marx’s and Elias’s conceptions of science. Finally, the paper argues that figurational sociology can build upon Elias’s work on the involvement and detachment balance in order to develop the resources to more adequately justify the normative value Elias places upon the extension of human ‘control’, and also deal with its political implications.*

Keywords: *Norbert Elias; Karl Marx; Means of orientation; Control; Involvement– Detachment balance*

1. Over-involvement and the detour via detachment [1].[#N1]

This section will address Elias’s conception of the involvement–detachment balance in the sciences in light of his discussion of Karl Marx’s work and how, despite Marx’s important achievements as a social scientist, ultimately his work is undermined by over-involvement with a particular political and normative stance. Marx can be said to share with Elias a conception of the task of social scientists as entailing the further development of the scientific project initiated in the context of the natural sciences, which strives to acquire an increasingly more realistic understanding of the cosmos and the impersonal, blind forces shaping its development and affecting humanity, on the basis of which a higher degree of conscious control can be attained over these forces. However, Elias also expressly moves away from Marx and problematises several of the dimensions characterising his critical approach. In particular, Elias (2012a: 177–200) argues that, as a means of orientation, Marx’s approach did not always achieve the degree of reality-congruence that Marx attributed to it and, in fact, is characterised by several problems that compromise its intended role as an orientating device.

Elias (2012a: 179) identifies as particularly problematic the manner in which Marx’s political allegiances and passions contaminate his analysis of the capitalist stage of development, and shape it into assuming value-judgements and presuppositions which, in Elias’s view, end up veiling from Marx a more reality-congruent assessment of the actual patterns of human historical development. For example, Marx’s scientific analysis of class relations in the nineteenth century captures the historical developmental character of their constitution as changing patterns of interaction and interdependence between groups of people emerging out of their

respective positions in the expanding webs of human interdependence (Elias 2012a: 181). However, at the same time, Marx's political 'involvement', in the form of his compromise with working-class politics, led him to constantly thwart his own scientific analysis and to reduce the processual character of his conception of class and class relations. Hence, for political reasons, Marx gave a 'teleological twist' to his sociological model of class development and presented the working class at the stage of social development of his own time 'as the eternal, unchanging working class – until all classes disappeared' (Elias 2012a: 181). In this context, Elias comments that 'Marx the sociologist saw the developmental character of class structures clearly enough, even though, as a political ideologist, he constantly covered up what he perceived as a scientist' (2012a: 182).

In this manner, Marx's critical approach as a means of orientation is characterised by the prevailing contradiction between, on the one hand, the scientific assessment of the developmental character of human relations of interdependence throughout history and their emergent properties and potentialities. And, on the other hand, Marx's tendency to 'process-reduce' some of his core concepts and observations so as to make them a useful support for his teleological narrative about the role of the nineteenth-century working class as the universal representative and liberator of humanity in the future revolutionary establishment of communism (Elias 2012a: 181).

However, according to Elias, this contradiction between Marx's role as a scientist and a political ideologist expresses a wider problem of the social sciences. It shows how social scientists' analyses can be undermined in their reality-congruence and usefulness as a means of orientation by forms of 'involvement', be they political or otherwise, that might lead them either to deny as unacceptable, or simply not acknowledge, certain features of the historical development of humanity because these are incompatible with their wishes, fears or emotionally satisfying views of themselves, their social groups and the world (Elias 2007a: 71). The question thus arises of how these involvements might be tamed and brought under control, in order to avoid their undermining of one's scientific analysis and to permit the production of more reality-congruent means of orientation. Elias (2007a) poses his observations on problems of involvement and detachment in an attempted answer.

According to Elias (2007a: 71), one should not conceptualise the problem of the influence of involvements in scientific inquiries as an opposition between absolute value-freedom and total submission to emotional or political attachments. Instead, it is better to conceptualise the problem from the perspective of different balances between involvement and detachment. As one goes through different balances in a scale of ascending types, approaches to knowing the world become increasingly detached, shaped not by the immediate interests, fears and wishes of the researchers and their communities, but instead by a critically-minded attitude concerned with developing increasingly more reality-congruent understandings of reality, whether or not these clash with the researchers' prior involvements (Elias 2007a: 71). However, this 'detour via detachment' (Elias 2007a: 72) does not entail an abandonment of involvement; in fact, involvements continue to play a role in research and in the personality structures of individuals, but they are posed in a different manner. Elias (2007a) calls this reposition a 'secondary form of involvement'.

Kilminster (2007: 121), building upon Elias's work on the involvement–detachment balance, uses the term 'involved detachment' to refer to a tilting of the balance in the researchers' personality structures towards detachment, that implies a transformation of their emotional and evaluative involvements, so that they are no longer shaped only by personal and communal interests and concerns, but also by the widened horizon of the interests and concerns of humanity as a whole, as a direct result of a more detached understanding of themselves and the world. Furthermore, new types of involvement tend to arise from a greater emphasis on detached scientific analysis. That is to say, the increased importance attributed to the search for reality-congruence, and the development of critical attitudes towards findings, now appear as values in themselves about which the researchers can feel extremely involved and emotionally invested in (Kilminster 2007: 122).

Hence, while the typical questions of a predominantly involved approach are essentially ego- and community-centred, such as ‘What does this mean for me or for us?’, the questions characterising a form of ‘involved detachment’ of the balance are more centred on the object of research itself, such as ‘What is it?’ or ‘How are these events connected with others?’ (Elias 2007a: 72; Kilminster, 2007: 118).

However, Elias (2007a: 114) notes the difficulty in tilting the balance towards detachment, which he partly explains by the dynamics of the ‘double bind’. Double binds entail, on the one hand, that, as the threats and problems posed by uncontrolled forces – either natural or social – increase, so too do the tensions among human beings and, consequently, their emotional involvement in conceptualising themselves and their world. On the other hand, the higher the level of people’s involvement, the more difficult it is for them to undergo a ‘detour via detachment’ that permits the production of more reality-congruent knowledge about the world, and thus a better chance of controlling these forces (Elias 2007a: 116). As Elias (2007a: 20) observes, the double bind has been partially broken in some sections of humanity vis-à-vis non-human nature. A historically hard-won ‘detour via detachment’ permitted more reality-congruent knowledge about the world and a greater capacity to control non-human forces, thus diminishing the threat posed by these forces and, consequently, the tensions and involvements caused by them. This has permitted yet further advancements in detachment and in the development of more reality-congruent knowledge. Hence, in relation to non-human nature, some sections of humanity have achieved an involvement–detachment balance characterised by an overall attitude of ‘involved detachment’ (Kilminster, 2007: 118).

However, this ‘same process which has made people less dependent on nature has made them more dependent of each other’ (Elias 2007a: 77). It has brought about new forms of interconnection and interdependence between people from which emerge unplanned social processes that pose new sources of insecurity and threat. Thus, the double bind is still prevalent in social processes where people ‘vulnerable and insecure [...] under these conditions, [...] cannot stand back and look at the course of events calmly like more detached observers’ (Elias 2007a: 78). Consequently, knowledge about human social existence and the general attitude towards its study are still characterised by a balance predominantly shaped by ‘involvement’, in comparison with the knowledge about non-human nature. This implies that the level of prior involvements, especially in the form of ideological political motivations, permeating and conditioning the production of more reality-congruent knowledge is still particularly high. These are exactly the type of dynamics that ultimately undermine Marx’s work as a social scientist as the high levels of social threat posed by uncontrolled capitalist development led him to constantly mix his social scientific insights on the processual character of class relations with highly involved utopian expectations about the role of the proletariat and the possibility of bringing social relations under absolute conscious human control.

The prevalence of these prior involvements in the social sciences which, as in the case of Marx’s work, frequently appear more committed to certain political projects than to scientific analysis leading to reality-congruent observations, leads Elias to assume a highly ‘disciplining’ attitude towards the need to carry out a detour via detachment in the study of human social existence. Consequently, his appeals, and the way they shape figurational sociology, assume a particularly ‘repressive’ posture towards any form of manifestation of involvement (Kilminster 2007: 126). Elias’s disciplining attitude, promoting detachment, has prevailed in figurational sociology and led to a sustained resistance, on the part of figurational sociologists, to discuss issues of involvement, other than when contrasting them to the attitude they consider more legitimate and with greater worth, that of detachment.

However, this lack of engagement with issues of involvement is frequently accompanied by the continued description of greater ‘control’ over social processes as one of the goals of figurational sociology. The theme of ‘control’, although not central in figurational sociology, thus possesses significant normative value to figurational sociologists and is particularly prevalent in Elias’s work. However, as Dunne (2009: 48) observes,

the value placed on ‘control’ cannot be adequately justified from the position of ‘involved detachment’ that figurational sociology attempts to nurture, since it is a value significantly different from the other values characterising that form of the balance, such as ‘reality-congruence’. ‘Control’ is a notion that expresses a specific normative stance regarding human life and existence and the ‘preference’ for a specific set of social conditions vis-à-vis others. As such, it expresses a form of involvement that cannot be accounted for by the types of involvement characteristic of ‘involved detachment’. And yet a deeper discussion of the meaning and reason for the importance of ‘control’ is constantly pushed to the side-lines, a consequence of many figurational sociologists’ present self-understanding, whose disciplining attitude towards detachment blocks from discussion topics that might reveal underlying forms of involvement. Consequently, no discussion is carried out on the question: ‘why control?’ (Dunne 2009: 48).

Not engaging with this question weakens figurational sociology’s stance as a particularly adequate approach to the study of human social development, especially when some of its proponents claim its central place in the social sciences (Quilley and Loyal 2005). In particular, by not engaging with the theme of ‘control’, figurational sociology is at cross-purposes with its own stated-purpose of making more intelligible and conscious the facts of social life and scientific development, effectively denying itself the capacity to better understand its own stated positions and, consequently, its role in the overall development of the sciences and the species.

However, despite the detached silence that figurational sociology tends to keep over the issue of ‘control’, there are ample resources in Elias’s work that, when contextualised in a wider tradition concerned with the role of science in human development, can provide valuable clues as to what is the normative content of the notion of ‘control’ and, consequently, what are its underlying implications for figurational sociology. The next section will focus on assessing how Marx’s approach to this topic affects his conception of the orientating role of science and how it connects to the value he attributes to the notion of ‘control’, and, consequently, to its political implications.

2. Why ‘control’?

It is now widely recognised that the ‘modern synthesis’ in biology played an important role in Elias’s thought and led him to characterise the social dimension of humanity as only the latest of a series of emergent integrative levels in the overall process of development of the cosmos, or what he calls ‘the Great Evolution’ (Elias 2007a: 181) [\[2\]\[#N2\]](#). Quilley (2010) and Kilminster (2007: 141) have explored to some depth the relation between Elias’s work and that of the authors of the modern synthesis such as Theodosius Dobzhansky, Ernst Mayr, or Julian Huxley. These authors put forward a conception of the cosmos as an unplanned, blind, generative process, throughout the history of which new levels of integration emerge – from the physical, to the biological, to the social – which are not reducible to each other and which possess their own characteristics, and yet must necessarily always be based on, and partially explained by, the levels of integration below them.

As Quilley (2010: 407) notes, Elias was significantly influenced by the ‘evolutionary humanism’ of the modern synthesizers. Evolutionary humanism is identified by its proponents as a political stance that arises not from their prior political commitments, but instead from the scientific analysis and understanding of the process of cosmogenesis itself (Huxley 1956; 1965). According to this position, the integrative level of cosmogenesis brought about with the development of human beings and their social relations inaugurates level-specific characteristics in the history of the cosmos. In particular, it expresses the emergence of a species with a capacity to control its environment to a previously unwitnessed degree, and thus effectively self-determine

how it lives, develops and even the future course of the process of cosmogenesis itself. [3],[#N3]. For evolutionary humanists, such realisation carries with it ethical, moral and political implications. It requires a deep engagement with the conditions under which that control can or should be carried out. As Huxley (1965: 27) argues, human self-determination creates meaning and purpose in a purposeless cosmos, and that fact, in itself, possesses normative value and implies an obligation to understand how the human capacity for control can be both extended and exercised in a manner which preserves and promotes the emergent properties of cosmogenesis.

However, Elias's influences extend beyond those of the evolutionary biologists; the influence of Marx also appears to be of particular relevance in this context. Marx also considers that the human species is something radically new in the evolutionary landscape because of its capacity to labour upon non-human nature and transform it. Marx (1992: 329) notes that, although other animals also 'produce', building nests and dwellings, the distinguishing feature of human labour is that it has, throughout the historical process of human development, become increasingly conscious and not purely moved by instinct and the satisfaction of natural needs. Marx thus sees in humanity a species that has progressively developed the capacity to transform nature, and in the process transform itself, in a manner that enabled it to emancipate from its natural origins and to create a novel human-made world of things, ideas, knowledge and needs. As the 'anthroposphere' expands (Goudsblom and de Vries 2002), humans constantly push back the natural boundaries of their own potential and limitations, but they also express the untapped potential of non-human nature into new forms and modes of being, which depend on the conscious activity of self-determined beings to be brought into existence (Marx 1992: 349). This perspective enables Marx (1981: 959) to produce a philosophical synthesis that recognises the material basis of human existence, and yet acknowledges the fundamental and defining human capacity for freedom. [4],[#N4]. Furthermore, to Marx, the historical emergence of a species with a capacity to consciously control the conditions of its own existence, and thus expand the realm of its self-determined activity, also has important normative implications. That is, it implies a normative commitment to the further expansion of that capacity and to the greater intelligibility of its historical development.

The main problem for Marx – and here he reveals greater nuance than the evolutionary humanists – is that the historical expansion of the human capacities for control is not a linear process. Human history is predominantly shaped by unplanned dynamics which, arising out of human interdependence, become determining forces over human existence. So, even though nature might be brought under greater control, concomitant social forces exert their determining power over humanity in an uncontrolled and unplanned manner (Marx 1973: 541). Marx's analysis of capitalism consists exactly in an attempt to provide a theoretical orientating framework through which the patterns of human global interdependence can be better understood: a framework that orientates people as to how to transform their prevalent social conditions in a manner that brings into existence a new pattern of human interdependence and guarantees the further development of human control over nature and society.

Elias's stance regarding 'control' can be better understood if framed in light of the works of Marx and the evolutionary humanists on this topic. The value Elias attributes to the notion of 'control', and his conception of science as the development of reality-congruent 'means of orientation', relates directly to the positions of these authors regarding the study of human development and the process of cosmogenesis. In his model of cosmogenesis, Elias maintains the higher level synthesis achieved by Marx and the evolutionary humanists, assuming a perspective that is 'not only social, but natural, dynamic and evolutionary, and is based on his materialist monism that is not reductionist but rather emergentist at irreducible levels' (Monivas 2013: 72). Furthermore, Elias (2007a) appropriates Marx's conception of human historical development as characterised by the interplay between the simultaneous expansion of the human powers of control over

nature and lack of control over social processes. But it can also be argued that Elias significantly improves upon their work by carrying out a ‘detour via detachment’ in his appropriation of these themes, which implies an abandonment of the frequently teleological and progressivist conceptions of human development that characterises the works of the modern synthesizers and that of Karl Marx. For example, Elias achieves a greater detachment in his analysis of the historically processual character of class relations, expressed in his conception of ‘figuration’ (Elias 2012b), which permits him to move from a more politically involved debate to a more detached scientific discussion about the relative autonomy and dependency of people in their reciprocal relationships (Elias 2005).

However, Elias’s emphasis on detachment also leads him to consistently avoid a discussion of the normative and political implications inherent in the notion of ‘control’. Unlike Marx or Huxley, Elias does not explain his position on ‘control’ through an appeal to the inherent normative value of the historical emergence of a species with a capacity to increasingly self-determine the conditions of its own existence. Nor does he engage with the necessarily political question of whether, in order to achieve a higher degree of conscious control, the patterns of human figurations have to be changed in specific ways; for example, following Marx, whether liberal free market capitalism is compatible with the exercise of collective democratic control over social processes. Instead, Elias limits himself to frequently describing greater ‘control’ as a scientific goal, without necessarily engaging either with why it should be valued in the first place or with the political implications inherent in that position.

As seen above, Elias’s position ultimately derives from his strong emphasis on achieving a ‘detour via detachment’, given the prevalent levels of political involvement plaguing the social sciences. However, at the same time, the disciplining and repressive emphasis on detachment continuously delays figurational sociology’s capacity to justify and better comprehend the implications of its own position on ‘control’.

3. Climbing the staircase: detached involvement

Elias (2007b) uses the metaphor of a spiral staircase to illustrate the ascending development of the involvement–detachment balance, in which each level of the staircase permits a better understanding of the lower levels and implies a higher synthesis of the previous balances. Elias’s call for a ‘detour via detachment’ is an attempt to move the social sciences up the staircase towards an involvement–detachment balance characterised by a predominance of detachment and a reposing of involvements; one that ensures involvements are not positions prior to scientific analysis which hinder its capacity to produce reality-congruent findings, but instead support detached scientific analysis itself. Such balance has been characterised as one of ‘involved detachment’ (Kilminster 2007: 122). However, as mentioned above, a position of ‘involved detachment’ limits figurational sociology’s capacity to account for its attributed value to the notion of ‘control’ or to engage with its implications.

Consequently, this section argues that ‘involved detachment’ must be considered as only *one* of the *two* dimensions of the involvement–detachment balance. The other dimension that we propose can be characterised as ‘detached involvement’, and essentially means that the tilting of the involvement–detachment balance towards detachment also fundamentally changes the type of *political* involvements affecting the social sciences and social researchers. The term ‘detached involvement’ is borrowed from Björk (2005) who uses it to characterise Elias’s intellectual attitude regarding the uncertain outcomes of democracy and war in inter-war Germany, an attitude of neither cynicism nor utopian leanings, but characterised by a balanced assessment of situations on the basis of detached knowledge about social processes. The concept is here further developed to characterise the second dimension of the involvement–detachment balance to

which figurational sociology aspires, and to consider how the theme of ‘control’ can be more adequately addressed in its context.

From a ‘detached involvement’ perspective, an initial ‘detour via detachment’ indeed moves researchers away from prior political involvements. However, these are not lost, but instead transformed. There thus occurs a ‘secondary involvement’ regarding the researchers political positions that emerges directly from the more realistic knowledge that detached scientific analysis produces about processes of human social development. Hence, it can be argued that there are two dimensions inherent in the involvement–detachment balance, that of ‘involved detachment’, and another of ‘detached involvement’, both expressions of different types of ‘secondary involvement’.

‘Detached involvement’ represents a striving to constantly understand and rethink the meaning and implications of figurational sociology’s attributed value to the notion of ‘control’. Consequently, this dimension of the involvement–detachment balance constantly transforms its own premises and its conception of what it means, in different historical circumstances and stages of development, for science to orientate people in ways that permit an expansion of human ‘control’. Underlying this position is the observation that the normative value attached to the notion of ‘control’ derives, on the one hand, from the awareness that greater conscious control over the conditions of human existence and their historical development is effectively the most realistic position regarding the future prospects for the survival of the species. And, on the other hand, from the recognition that in an unplanned, uncaring, purposeless and meaningless cosmos, there is an inherent dignity to, first, the emergence of sentience and, second, of a species capable of shaping the cosmos with will and consciousness, and filling it with purpose and meaning where previously there was none.

While a position of ‘detached involvement’ recognises that the degree of realistic knowledge about the human social level of integration is still too limited to allow more positive statements about the most adequate ways of organising peoples’ relations of interdependence with each other; at the same time, it also strives to analyse the existing stock of knowledge to at least produce statements about what kinds of social developments would be contrary to the further expansion of the human powers of control. Under present historical circumstances, when humanity experiences high levels of global interconnectedness and interdependence, as well as an expanding anthroposphere with significant harmful unplanned effects upon the biosphere (Goudsblom and de Vries 2002), one must ask which trends appear to be leading to the further expansion of human ‘control’, and which ones might be hindering such expansion and the capacity of human beings to manage their emergent level of global integration in ways that contain its unplanned and potentially harmful dynamics (Linklater 2011). While indeed there might not yet exist a large enough stock of knowledge to provide positive answers to this question, a position of ‘detached involvement’ would consider that it can already be argued that developmental trends such as the ‘drag-effect’ of nationalisms (Elias 2010), the untamed and uncontrolled character of financial aristocracies and financial markets (Blomert 2012; Ampudia de Haro 2012), and the continued developmental asymmetries between different states and human groups, constitute phenomena that significantly hinder the capacity of human beings to more consciously control the conditions of their existence and the transition to higher levels of global integration and interdependence. For the moment, this perspective can only identify these trends, without advancing positive statements on how exactly, and through what technological, habitus and figurational changes, the human capacity for control can be expanded, and the transition to higher levels of global integration achieved with the least harmful unplanned effects, since not enough detached scientific knowledge exists to enable such assessments.

The position of ‘detached involvement’ is thus a highly fragile one, but one which, according to the above argument, figurational sociology needs to engage with. In order to fulfil its purpose, adherents of such a position need to constantly rethink, re-assess and restate the detached involvements arising from the

developing stock of scientific knowledge about the processes of human historical development and humanity's relation with non-human nature. Furthermore, its proponents must be constantly conscious of the ever lurking danger of being overcome by involvements that are prior to scientific analysis. It is a position that must exist in permanent tension with itself and always in a tentative and provisional relation with its assessments and statements. 'Detached involvement' is thus a particularly difficult stance to achieve or maintain, demanding a high degree of self-control on the part of the researchers engaged with it. It becomes even harder to secure given that, inherent to it, is the assessment and posing of political involvements that are necessarily connected to highly emotionally-charged dimensions of social reality and which deal with phenomena that might pose threats to the researchers' particular social groups or personal identities. Hence, the danger of being trapped by double binds that obstruct the capacity to carry out a detached scientific analysis are extremely high.

The avoidance of such double binds depends, ultimately, on the self-control capacity of researchers to tame their prior involvements and to carry out a 'detour via detachment'. Such a measure of self-control demands at least the following conditions. First, a constant dialogue and engagement with the position of 'involved detachment', which, because of its attachment to values of reality-congruence and critical mindedness, is capable of assessing the position of 'detached involvement' and identifying involvements that cannot be supported by the available stock of reality-congruent knowledge. And second, researchers must follow Kilminster's (2000: 178) observation that figural sociologists should apply in their research the criteria of cognitive evaluation and the standard of detachment which *would* be taken for granted *if* a higher involvement–detachment balance had been achieved. They must strive to exercise self-control over their prior involvements and attempt a 'detour via detachment' that enables them to step back from the double binds of their personal and social situations, in an attempt to acquire a broader perspective and develop more reality-congruent knowledge. And only afterwards, through 'secondary involvement', will the researchers engage with how that knowledge re-frames the problem 'control', and with its political and normative implications.

Such a scenario becomes more plausible following another of Kilminster's (2007: 126) observations when, with reference to Wouters' (1998; 2008) work, he argues that it is possible that, in the context of historical circumstances implying longer and more interconnected global webs of human interdependence, the civilising process has moved from its more disciplining phase to one of greater 'informalisation'. That is to say, it has moved to a phase in which superego functions do not occur as automatically as before, and where the ego plays a greater role in self-controlling the degree of involvement of human beings, including social scientists, enabling them to exert greater conscious control over their involvements and a more self-determined internal balance between involvement and detachment. In this context, people:

are increasingly able to bring to the surface and control strange feelings and other previously more severely suppressed emotions [...] these are precisely the emotions, strange feelings and fantasies (as expressed in ideological convictions) that were always to be rigorously *excluded* from sociology in the greater detachment model of science advocated by Elias (Kilminster 2007: 127).

This more informal and less disciplining phase of the civilising process might enable exactly the type of self-control necessary to achieve a form of 'detached involvement'. The further development of a 'detached involvement' perspective is thus not only possible but also, as argued throughout this paper, essential for the future development of figural sociology.

Endnotes:

1. I would like to thank to Andrew Linklater, Stephen Dunne and Stephen Mennell for comments on earlier drafts of this article. Any omissions or mistakes are, of course, the sole responsibility of the author. [↗\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. The ‘modern evolutionary synthesis’ was developed between 1936 and 1947 and synthesizes within a single model of evolution various specialised areas of biology. It effectively unified biology as a field of study by integrating, amongst other areas, Mendelian genetics with Darwinian theory of evolution (Quilley 2010). [↗\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
3. The modern synthesis’s simultaneous emphasis, on the one hand, on the unplanned emergence of levels of integration characterising the process of cosmogenesis, and, on the other hand, on the historically emergent capacity of human beings for conscious control over their conditions of existence, expresses a higher-level synthesis between a mechanistic/materialistic and a voluntaristic/vitalistic conception of evolution. It avoids both a deterministic materialism that reduces human beings to expressions of their physical organisation, and an idealistic vitalism that considers humans somehow animated by a ‘spiritual’ essence that separates them from the realm of natural evolution. This synthesis is also clearly present in Elias (2007a: 230). [↗\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
4. Marx produces a philosophical synthesis between materialism and idealism that shares important similarities with the conception of the processes of cosmogenesis through emergent levels of integration that would come to be developed in the context of the ‘modern evolutionary synthesis’. [↗\[#N4-ptri\]](#)

References

- Ampudia de Haro, Fernando (2012) ‘Una lectura eliasiana de la crisis financiera’, *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 74: 3, pp. 363–394.
- Björk, Micael (2005) ‘A plea for detached involvement: Norbert Elias on intellectuals and political imagination in inter-war Germany’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 18: 2, pp.43–61.
- Blomert, Reinhardt (2012) ‘The Taming of Economic Aristocracies’, *Human Figurations*, 1: 2, pp. 1–9.
- Dunne, Stephen (2009) ‘The politics of figurational sociology’, *The Sociological Review*, 57: 1, pp. 28–57.
- Elias, Norbert (2005) *The Court Society*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 2]. vol.8].
- Elias, Norbert (2007b) *An Essay on Time*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Work, vol. 9].
- Elias, Norbert (2008) *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 14].
- Elias, Norbert (2010) *The Society of Individuals*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 10].
- Elias, Norbert (2012a) *What is Sociology?* Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 5].
- Elias, Norbert (2012b) *On the Process of Civilisation*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 3].
- Goudsblom, Johan and de Vries, Bert (2002) *Mappae Mundi: Humans and Their Habitats in Long-Term Ecological Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Huxley, Julian (1957) *New bottles for new wine: essays*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Huxley, Julian (1965) *The humanist frame*. London: Allen & Unwin.

- Kilminster, Richard (2000) *The Sociological Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the global age*. London: Routledge.
- Kilminster, Richard (2007) *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Linklater, Andrew (2011) *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, Karl (1973) *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl (1981) *Capital Vol.3*. London: Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl (1992) 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', in New Left Review (ed), *Karl Marx: Early Writings*. London: Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 279–401.
- Marx, Karl, 'The German Ideology' in David McLellan (ed), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 175–208.
- Monivas, Jesús (2013) 'The Problem of Freedom in Norbert Elias in Dialogue with the Neurosciences', *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 142, pp. 69–92.
- Quilley, Stephen and Loyal, Steven (2005) 'Eliasiian Sociology as a 'Central Theory' for the Human Sciences', *Current Sociology*, 53: 5, pp.807–828.
- Quilley, Stephen (2010) 'Integrative levels and the 'Great Evolution': Organicist biology and the sociology of Norbert Elias', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10: 4, pp. 391–419.
- Wouters, Cas (1998) 'How Strange to Ourselves are our Feelings of Superiority and Inferiority? Notes on *Fremde und Zivilisierung* by Hans-Peter Waldhoff', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 15: 1, pp. 131–150.
- Wouters, Cas (2008) *Informalization: Manners & Emotions since 1890*. London: Sage Publications.

Biography

André Saramago is a PhD candidate at Aberystwyth University and a recipient of a scholarship from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. His current research is predominantly focused on analysing the development of means of orientation regarding human development and global interdependence, which has led him to engage with both continental philosophy and figurational sociology.

Hosted by [Michigan Publishing](#), a division of the [University of Michigan Library](#).

For more information please contact mplib-help@umich.edu.

Online ISSN: 2166-6644