

Editor's Introduction

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Volume 4, Issue 3, September 2015

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0004.301> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0004.301>]

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As Michigan Publishing and we have monitored the e-reception of *Human Figurations* since 2013, so too have others commented on the reception of Elias's work around the world. The two are more than coincidentally connected of course. While the spread of digital technologies has aided the readership of this journal around the world, at the same time, a major barrier exists to the wider, more adequate and accurate understanding of Elias's work, and its subsequent reception, particularly in the United States (US).

In Issue 3 (2), June 2014, we invited readers of *Human Figurations* to keep a watching brief on how the debate concerning informalisation would develop in theoretical and empirical terms. This was on the back of the publication in the issue of Collins' full text on the four theories of informalisation and how to test them. Indeed, the debate about this topic predates the 2013 contribution and is understood better in its social conditions, that is, within the context of the more or less continued ignorance by American social scientists of the work of Norbert Elias. Commentaries on, or the uses of, Elias that have emanated from the US have tended to be excessively simplistic, in part because of a reading only of Elias's 1939 *magnum opus*, *On the Process of Civilisation*, and a lack of knowledge of developments in the figurational research tradition since then, including the belated publication of Elias's own elaborations of his ideas.

In this issue, Wouters and Mennell extend the debate by charting the reception history of Elias's work since the 1960s, organising this into several rounds. Their paper contributes to a new, third, round by establishing a more solid and subtler body of criteria for studying civilising processes. This is important in their avoidance or perpetuation of boxing the air, because they position their evaluations at the level of an onus of proof. Their claim is that there is something in American political culture, and in academic traditions that reflect this, that poses an obstacle to a more adequate understanding of figurational sociology. Of this they highlight a number of examples: the acceptance by some American writers of interpretations of an informalisation process, but a rejection of the theory underpinning this, including civilising processes; the Janus-faced acceptance and rejection of parts of both theories; and, assumptions by others (critics) that their position on informalisation is unchallengeable, if not unbreakable. In short, feelings of superiority appear to function as a major barrier to a wider, more adequate and accurate understanding of Elias's work, and to its subsequent reception.

This is despite the fact that, outside of the United States, the influence of Elias has tended to increase since his death in 1990. For a school of thought to survive, it has often been noted, it is essential that it has a nucleus of writers and thinkers, working to test, develop and extend its parameters, and also an organisational framework. Górnicka, Liston and Mennell trace the work of the Norbert Elias Foundation, based in Amsterdam, as Elias's executors, in promoting Elias's ideas, and the impact of those ideas on the work of many scholars in various parts of the world. This intergenerational continuity has been central to the more positive reception of Elias outwith the United States, and to the potential of his work to form the basis for the development of a 'central theory' in the social sciences of a scope not seen since the heyday of Parsons. Some studies have already been presented about the young Elias, while others have examined the development of a successive establishment of the figurational tradition in West Germany and Europe based on narratives from first-generation 'figurati' who worked with him. Incorporated into the paper in this issue, several phases can

be discerned in the growth of Elias's reputation: 1925–c.1977; 1977–1990, and; 1990 to date. Being processually oriented, Górnicka, Liston and Mennell note that characteristics of earlier phases persist alongside those of later. Notable features of this developing organisational framework include the Norbert Elias Stichting, the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, the publication of Collected Works, a prize (now discontinued), newsletter and online journal, and regular conferences across a range of themes, 'old' and 'new'.

Speaking of 'new' themes, Petintseva's contribution to this issue is a case in point. She seeks to approach migration, particularly recent (forced) migration to Western Europe, through an Eliasian lens using established–outsiders as the conceptual framework. This is a framework that has been applied to marginalisation, discriminatory processes and to everyday interactions incorporating changes in power relations. For Petintseva, the question is not so much whether or not migration *is* a new phenomenon or whether some groups of immigrants *are* different in one way or another. Over-aggregated distinctions simplify the diversity of so-called new migrants – their geographic areas of origin, motives for migration, backgrounds and situations in host countries. Rather, it seems more relevant to focus on diversification in terms of changing attention and representations, the conditions of inequality under which migration takes place, the contexts in which immigrants relocate, and, most importantly, their position in these societies. In that respect, dynamic yet straightforward distinctions are necessary in order to monitor the positions of vulnerable groups and to facilitate discussions on possible discrimination as well as emancipatory potential. Given the heartbreaking stories of migration across the Mediterranean into Europe, and within various parts of the EU, her paper offers a timely insight into how being 'new' is translated into social positions (and *vice versa*), the perceptions and treatment of the so-called new migrants, and how these positions are defined and researched in academic literature.

From 'new' to 'old' and to empirical material concerning Elias's use and interpretation of *The Medieval Housebook*. Inaccurately at times, critics of the figurational tradition have claimed that proponents have sought to (simply put) reproduce the main tenets of Elias's work rather than subjecting it to open and critical commentary. For this reason, we particularly welcome constructive contributions that seek to reappraise figurational work. Murphy's paper is an important contribution in this regard, and one that we believe will come to have some methodological and theoretical significance for future generations and in the widening reception of Elias's work. This is because the empirical pool from which Elias drew – fourteen selected pictures, 'Scenes from the Life of a Knight' – can be reproduced and examined by readers alongside Murphy's reassessment of this, the introduction of which is published here. Murphy's argument is that if one is to move from a plausible theory, like that of civilising processes incorporating associated socio- and psycho-genetic changes, to an explanation with a high degree of object adequacy, one also has to undertake a theoretically-guided and empirically rigorous assessment of the processes involved. For him, this does not include the identification and presentation of confirmatory, in effect doctored, evidence. Rather the starting point is that all social scientific work is a work in progress. Steps, some big and others small, are made in our knowledge of the social world, intertwined as they are with the intellectual development of social scientists and sociologies of knowledge. With this in mind, Murphy seeks to assess the extent to which Elias adhered in practice to the premises informing the figurational perspective through a reassessment of 'Scenes from the Life of a Knight'. The taster included here should whet the appetite of readers interested in research methods and methodologies. A full version of Murphy's work is published in e-book format and available from the Norbert Elias Foundation website.

Lastly, reflecting the widening reception of Elias's work in other languages, Giovannini tackles the different meanings that Elias ascribes to fantasy and reality, and those deducible from his method of working. Aspects of this work have already been published in *Cambio*, an Italian journal inspired by Elias's work on the processes of transformation of societies. Picking up on some of the themes highlighted in the Murphy's paper,

Giovannini notes that Elias preferred to use the term 'reality-congruent' instead of reality and, in so doing, demonstrated the methodological fertility of imaginative leaps. His paper seeks to reconstruct the various meanings Elias expressly gives to the two words, but also the more implicit ones deducible from his work as well as identifying possible equivalences of form and meaning. Giovannini argues that the whole framework of Elias's sociological projects makes it necessary to resort to imaginative leaps. In terms of discipline, Elias does not stop – indeed he cannot stop – at the boundaries drawn by sociological tradition, much less at those of academic propriety, and he therefore seeks empirical verification and confirmation in other approaches and methodologies, with constant incursions into the other human sciences.

Subsequent generations of figurational sociologists have, it has been argued, managed, with a highly reflexive and committed level of relatively detached thinking, to pave the way for the continued wider reception of Elias's work. It is hoped that the contributions to this issue will continue in that vein. They, like all others, however, are open to question and critical appraisal.

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September 2015

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644