

Using Fantasy: Notes on Elias's Sociology

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Abstract: *This article discusses the different meanings that Elias ascribes to fantasy and reality and those deducible from his method of working. The undeniable contrast between the two concepts must be qualified. Elias preferred to use the term reality-congruent instead of reality, meaning the knowledge of it that is possible. As for fantasy, it must be distinguished from the term imagination. Elements of fantasy can foster the cognitive process if transmuted into imagination, harnessed by factual knowledge deriving from serious empirical research. Elias's entire work, which confronts a virtually limitless space-time frame, demonstrates the methodological fecundity of resorting to imaginative leaps. It is no accident that his fundamental figurational model of sociology is suggested as the result of an exercise of sociological imagination unfettered by traditional ways of thinking.*

Keywords: *Norbert Elias, Sociology, Reality, Fantasy, Imagination*

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

—Charles Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)

Premise

Elias's extensive and varied scientific production manifests a constant drive towards the construction of a sociology progressively freed from the potent influences of secular and philosophical traditions that long hampered its process of institutionalisation as a discipline of equal dignity and validity with those of the natural sciences. While these had long since adopted in their cognitive practices the 'rational', 'positive' methodologies and approaches of the Enlightenment and Positivism, the social sciences continued to linger on a terrain strongly tainted by interpretations and evaluations of philosophical origin, alien by nature to any empirical testing and therefore the main cause of grave distortions resulting from their cognitive procedures. The object of research, society, remained dominated by magical-religious, philosophical traditions that often impeded the application of modern scientific methodologies, or else admitted them but on condition of guiding their cognitive action. In turn, the persistently weak methodological tools of the social sciences left room for magical-type, religious and philosophical 'explanations' of reality, indeed often strengthening their persuasive power.

Elias, as heir but at the same time a free interpreter of the noblest Comtian tradition (1970: chapter 1), carried on a hard battle against the philosophical imperialism of his day, and, in the same spirit, outlined the profile, role and importance of sociology in relation to the other human sciences, as well as to the biological and natural sciences. He assigned to sociology an ambitious organisational role in the scientific work of the other human and natural disciplines [1][#N1]—that of aggregating what history had divided. His often stated objective

was to limit the damage incurred by a scientific division of labour that prevents us today from considering the individual, society and nature as a unified whole (Elias 2009b; and the comments of Quilley and Loyal 2005; Perulli 2011).

Elias was not alone in this battle against philosophical hegemony. In the period of the Weimar Republic, the 'exodus from philosophy' was particularly marked, but his position was far more radical, not so much due to a personal anti-philosophical idiosyncrasy [2][#N2] as to his need/will to proudly affirm the role and autonomy of sociology, a post-philosophical sociology, which sought in empirical proof the validity of his working hypotheses, and therefore brought philosophy –still firmly dependent in its explanations of the world on a theological, magical, mystical way of thinking –to a crisis point [3][#N3].

Fantasy and reality: enduring obstacles to scientific knowledge

Elias's polemic against philosophy and its ideological domination of the humanities and social sciences are, in my opinion, the origin of many obscurities and a few contradictions in the use of two central concepts in his sociology: *fantasy* and *reality*. In this article I will try to reconstruct the various meanings Elias expressly gives to the two words, but also the more implicit ones deducible from his work. Lastly, I will try to identify possible equivalences of form and meaning.

Elias frequently returned to the concept of 'fantasy', each time stressing different aspects. In general, he loaded the term with that set of beliefs, myths, prejudices and values, almost always of magical-religious origin, which generate the fears, anxieties and insecurities that characterise the human condition. Human beings, faced with the impossibility of living without understanding the world around us, have always resorted to explanations of fantasy. Magic, religion and philosophy have then proceeded to elaborate and institutionalise them through the successive efforts of clerics and intellectuals. The symbolic, cultural, ideological and religious products that ensued have always been instrumentalised within the two crucial areas of *politics* and *science*. In the first sphere –politics – fantasy's myths and symbols are above all a tool for manipulating the masses (as Marx and Mills would say), who are hampered from accessing the real (and not fantastic) explanations of the processes behind social relationships and domination. Some of these beliefs have been used by power elites as tools of popular legitimisation– true Gaetano Mosca-style 'political formulas' (Elias 1970: 22–24).

But it is on the second sphere – science – that I would like to dwell. In Elias's reflections, various analyses and arguments intertwine, some referable to the human nature of scholars, others to the political history of scientific, academic and disciplinary development, and still others more directly to the sciences of society. Let us begin with the first. Anyone who makes science her/his vocation is not safe from the fears and insecurities of the human condition, and so like everyone else becomes the unwitting victim of prejudices, myths and magical-religious beliefs. Nor is one saved by one's scholarly condition. On the contrary, it is one's very cognitive tension and function within formal institutions, whose purpose is to ferret out 'truth', that is likely to make one yet weaker before the prospect of living without security and explanations. This leads to filling in the gaps in one's knowledge with 'fantasy' explanations, resorting to one's own personal pre-judgments, but also acritically accepting the ways of thinking and working, and the interpretive solutions – in a word, the 'fantasies' – that are dominant in one's scientific community. A scholar, as prisoner of herself/himself and of her/his pre-scientific convictions, and at the same time adrift in the mainstream of her/his discipline, loses sight of her/his basic task, that of searching for truth. One cannot, and in a sense wishes not to, discover

reality because real explanations would contradict or weaken the ones so commonly accepted in her/his personal and professional environment, thus threatening her/his security [4].[#N4].

Scientific, academic and disciplinary development (the second point) has witnessed a change over time in the relationship between fantasy and reality. The laborious procedure of the process of demagification (or demythologisation, as Elias calls it, 1985: 85), uncertain and discontinuous in time and space, has made it possible to establish a more favorable equilibrium for true scientific knowledge [5].[#N5]. The crisis of magical-religious conceptions begins to bear fruit from the middle of the second millennium, allowing – though not without resistance – the emergence of a scientific conception in the fields of physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology and other natural sciences. The changes that occurred in the Renaissance, and especially those of the Protestant Reformation, made possible the development of a modern secular science which combines empirical research with theoretical analysis.

Here we come to the third point, the sciences of society. The natural sciences were able to successfully adopt rational methods and principles of reality, both from their relative neutrality toward ideological and religious conflicts, and as the result of a long process of learning and ‘detachment’, in a situation of frequent exposure to the dangers of failure, but also of a growing credibility from their scientific successes (Rojek: 588–589) [6] [#N6]. On the contrary, the path of the humanities and social sciences has been much more tortuous, for three reasons. The first lies undoubtedly in the stronger pressure to conform that the humanist schools (theological, juridical, philosophical) have had to endure at the hands of dominant religious and cultural traditions (Collins, 1996). Only the weaker and less important schools of philosophy have been able to gain some margin of freedom, although, their success has been, as we shall see, not without negative consequences for the social sciences. The second reason is central to Elias's analysis, and we will develop it further on. We just recall here the radical differences between natural and human sciences in their relative ability to apply scientific methods to study and research their respective fields of investigation, as a consequence, principally, of the extraordinary difficulty of the social sciences in establishing the necessary scientific detachment from their object of research. The third reason is that the social sciences have emerged only as *second comers* compared to the natural sciences, on which (mainly for reasons of legitimation) they are modeled, uncritically adopting methodologies and research techniques that were developed in a radically different cognitive sphere. Elias writes:

successful advances in the exploration of ‘*nature*’ have given the physical sciences the social status of overall models for all sciences. Those engaged in the study of the human levels of the universe thus find themselves caught in a trap; they are left with two equally sterile alternatives: either they can accept the supremacy of the models of exploration set by the physical sciences without further enquiry into their adequacy for their own task – *hoping perhaps in that way to secure for themselves the status of professional scientists*; or, finding the models of the natural sciences not entirely adequate for their own task, they can try to work out symbolic representations better suited for specificity of the connections at the human levels and, in that case, they are apt to founder in a sea of uncertainty – the results of their findings tend to give off a faint odour of speculation and metaphysics [my italics](1984a: 70).

What happens in the social sciences?

But what are the *elements of fantasy* that hinder the work of the social sciences, and what tools do we have to deal with them? Although elements of magical-religious origin were long dominant, the process of

demythologising gradually gained ground, replacing them with the more secular (but no less fantastic) elements of philosophy. Elias gradually extended the notion of 'elements of fantasy', in the end encompassing values, political ideologies, and even the most ordinary 'wishful thinking' (Kilminster 2011:110). This position led him to discuss a topic hotly debated in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century [7].[#N7], namely the relationship between the orientation of values, ideologies, political positions and scientific research in the social sciences. So the issue became more complicated, but also more concrete. If until then there was no mistaking the polemical sense of Elias's position regarding philosophical fantasies (as being incompatible with serious empirical research), the extension of the concept brought him onto a more complex terrain, which found its highest reflection in *Involvement and Detachment* (1983a), although it crops up directly or indirectly in many other of his works.

His emphatic position on the negative relationship established between the political choices of the researcher and one's capacity/opportunity to carry on scientific work undistorted by 'fantasies' was emblematic: this position was strengthened and clarified by his life choices, which implied, for himself and others (as Mennell 2011 testifies), that political commitment and sociological work are hardly compatible. In this regard there is an illuminating biographical testimony from near the end of his long life, in which the interviewers try several times to provoke Elias about his relationship with politics, getting evasive or politely disdainful answers:

Did you have a special aversion for partisan feeling?

I hated the disguise, not the partisanship. I was partisan myself. I hated the feeling that they had to speak in ideologies (Elias 1984b: 102)

And further on:

Isn't it odd that you weren't a member of a party while all your friends were? Did you feel free not to be one – why?

But with my viewpoint, with my need to look through the disguises, how could I have been a member of a party? All their programmes were based on wishful thinking (Elias 1984b: 104).

Until he grumbles at another question:

Did you ever want to found your own party?

Good gracious, no. It never crossed my mind. Good gracious me. It's an absurd idea, absolutely absurd (*ibidem*).

However, he gives a more detailed and 'thought through' position on the relationship between value choices and empirical research. In general, the research experience must not let itself be influenced by value distortion; that is, the researcher's prejudices, values and ideologies should never get involved in it, whether consciously or unconsciously. Such danger can be avoided by aspiring to a kind of *detachment* that alone will allow the researcher to proceed scientifically in analysing social processes. Detachment, Elias recognises, is not easy to achieve, and also risks reifying his object of research, as a result of linguistic usages and conceptual modes typical of the natural sciences, but not automatically transferrable to the social sciences (1970: 11) [8].[#N8]. It is a position not far from the 'distance from men and things' (*augenmass*) that Weber

pointed to as a necessary objective of the social scientist [9]. However, Elias did not fully embrace the willed prescriptive aspect, but rather stressed all its objective determinants. First, because researchers and social scientists are tied to reality by intertwining interdependencies, acting within power relations, living immersed in a web of constraints that conditions them and in which they condition themselves and others (1983a: 79–80, but also 1970: 8–9). Second, because most of the social events that one wants to investigate largely elude human control, and thereby trigger fantasies and feelings that are hardly compatible with a stance of detachment. Lastly, because the individual's inevitable membership in a social group or a scientific community with which one shares in his work a more or less consolidated and 'orthodox' set of values, ideologies and ideas, objectively exerts a negative pressure on practices of disengagement or detachment, which tend to be interpreted and sanctioned as dangerous heresies (Elias 1956a).

What can be realistically demanded of a researcher is therefore a stance of 'relative detachment' (1983a: chapter 1). Involvement and detachment, in absolute terms, are in fact only the (virtual) endpoints of a continuum along which emotional behaviour lies at one end and *real* cognitive practices lie at the other (Elias 1971: 19; 1983a: 91–93). It is therefore inevitable that even in scientific work there will be some involvement of affective aspects which interact in unknown, but certainly non-marginal ways, with the substantive rationality of the cognitive process.

A detachment is still *possible*, even in the midst of external and internal obstacles that limit its adoption, and this can allow what Elias most cherishes, and what makes his sociology a science that is anything but non-judgmental and acritical. Because, says Elias, it is precisely the necessary detachment from social values and political ideologies that enables the researcher to produce a scientifically reliable factual base, through which she/he can express value judgments. Here too we feel the strong affinity with Weber (1917, 1922): if 'relative detachment' means – as is inevitable – that one's values play a role in the initial phase of one's research, when it comes to choosing the cognitive approach and the incipient hypotheses, this does not prevent an assessment of the final results. Detachment thus acquires a constructive sense, allowing an assessment – critical but non-ideological, we might say 'scientific' – of the values, ideologies and political positions in play.

We must add a note of caution about the way Elias makes use of the concept of *reality*. While it is true that his statements often seem to have a distinctly positivist flavour, placing real scientific knowledge in sharp contrast with its fantasy mystification, nevertheless, when the need for polemic died down or weakened, and especially in the concrete stages of his research, Elias prefers to use another expression; one which is, in my opinion, significantly different from the simplified, drastic one, of *reality*. In many of his writings, from *What is Sociology?* And *Sociology of Knowledge* to especially *Involvement and Detachment* and *The Symbol Theory*, Elias willingly prefers (and with greater sense) the term *reality-congruent*. 'Congruence with reality' can mean many things. In Elias's discourse it clearly indicates concrete and concretely learnable knowledge, starting from that point of the continuum between involvement and detachment referred to earlier: a position of 'relative detachment' which scientifically legitimates the *possible* knowledge of reality. But it also means, in my opinion, the discovery of a moment of truth in its 'congruence with reality'. Reality is not (either today or, perhaps, ever) wholly knowable, but it can be approached (first sense). Furthermore, it itself becomes for the researcher a yardstick for assessing the validity of her/his own cognitive experience (second sense), which can be considered valid when its product is *reality-congruent* – when it does not come into conflict with reality or with common sense.

When fantasy becomes imagination

So far we have followed Elias down his critical path against the elements of fantasy that still philosophically and ideologically pollute the disciplinary field of sociology, in which, on the contrary, it is the elements of reality, the results of serious empirical work, that should prevail. In Elias's writings there is not, however, a continuous and consistent caveat to the ever-looming danger that values, ideas, prejudices, myths and traditions weigh unduly on scientific research in the social sciences. Actually, Elias repeatedly, explicitly or implicitly, hints at the *positive* weight which 'fantasy' can introduce into the cognitive experience. The problem is complex, in part elusive and not given to a single interpretation [15],[#N15]. But there is no doubt that for Elias the awareness of this inescapable link between cognitive process and imaginative action cannot fail to produce itself, especially in mankind's more 'backward' sciences (although I believe in all the sciences), on the basis of the use of a 'fantasy' (an imagination) fertilised by empirical knowledge and in turn fertilising the cognitive process.

Now I will try to address the most important aspects of this bond, and the multiple meanings that accompany it, without claiming to exhaust them all. The first is definitional in nature. Elias uses different definitions of fantasy, at times downright restrictive (such as when he refers simply to the mythical-magical and traditional elements that make it up), while at other times giving it a much broader content, including ideologies [16],[#N16], values, political convictions, etc.; the latter being gradually enriched with other contents: hopes, visions of the future, desires, utopias [17],[#N17] and perhaps even what may result from feelings and emotions. We could say: everything that is part of fantasy, different and separate from reality.

Let us try to go even further in this partial (but hopefully useful) stretching of Elias's thinking, and discuss the relationship between *fantasy* and *imagination*. I would advance this definition: *imagination is a variant of fantasy applied and controlled 'by a factual knowledge'* (Elias 1970: 22). This means that only hard, theoretically-oriented empirical work may allow fantasy (or rather, imagination) to grasp with incisiveness and originality those aspects that defy representation on the sole basis of systematic empirical findings, imposing as they may be [18],[#N18]. But it also means, as Elias points out, that there is an inextricable link between fantasy and reality, for the simple reason that the researcher enters with one's whole being into the cognitive process. Elias writes:

it is easy to see that it is not only the 'intellect' but human beings 'in the round' who are involved in the pursuit of knowledge. Its emotional significance plays no less a part than its cognitive value in its production and development – it plays a part, for instance, in the struggles that surround innovations in thought. Nor is this aspect of knowledge a matter of guesswork and speculation. The changes which knowledge undergoes, from the earlier, more emotive and naively self-centered forms to the later, emotionally more controlled and more object-oriented forms, are as firmly structured as changes in what one may call the purely intellectual aspects of knowledge – *in fact, they are hardly separable* [my italics] (Elias 1983a: 132).

Let us continue in the game of interpretation. Elias, as I said, often utilises the concepts of fantasy, imagination, image [19],[#N19] interchangeably; and just as often he labels the product of imaginative effort with the word *figure*. In such conditions, fantasy works as imagination does, producing an image, creating a picture that breathes life from the materiality of empirical findings into something that was not there before and that suddenly gives voice to heaps of hitherto silent data. It is just as interesting, and I close with these derivations of Elias's thought, that the central category of his sociology is *figuration* – which, not coincidentally, Elias repeatedly represents with a figure (1970: 9ss.) or, when he wants to emphasise the movement, a *dance* (1968: 526) [20],[#N20].

The maieutic capacity of fantasy in the social sciences has several explanations. Some originate from a comparison, on this level, with the natural sciences. These, as I said at the beginning, freed themselves of most of the magical-mythical fantasies about nature that had been inherited from tradition, and proceeded more decisively and well in advance (at least as far back as the sixteenth century) down the road of rationality. The same has not occurred in the humanities and social sciences, where the weight of imagination and interpretive traditions is still preponderant. If it is true, as we have said, that they have adversely conditioned the development of the social sciences and their path toward 'reality', it is equally true that – *at this stage of development and for the specific complexity of human society* – the imaginative leap (made under the 'right' conditions of detachment) is still highly useful [21],[#N21]. As Elias writes in one of the few passages where he expresses himself with great clarity on the issue:

One kind of fantasy, however, plays a quite indispensable role in the process of scientification and the process by which people gained increasing mastery over reality. That is the kind of fantasy that is both kept in check and made fruitful by close contact with factual observation [Elias's italics] (1970: 18).

The word 'fantasy' sounds harmless enough. That fantasies play an indispensable, highly constructive role in human life is not disputed here. Like the ability to present many different facial expressions, to smile or to weep, the highly developed capacity for fantasy is a uniquely human characteristic. But here we refer to fantasy of a particular type, or more accurately to fantasies which are applied to the wrong part of social life. When not controlled by factual knowledge, this type of fantasy is, especially in a situation of crisis, among the most unreliable, often most murderous impulses governing human action. In such situations people do not need to be insane for these impulses to be let loose (1970: 22).

Even the 'positive' heritage of the natural sciences – to which the social sciences have historically conformed – does not lend itself easily to an automatic use. The ideas of law, causality, determination, etc. are unusable for interpreting social reality, and therefore an effort of imagination is needed to develop from scratch specific models suitable for describing and interpreting society and its processes; as it is necessary to invent new linguistic and conceptual tools better suited to scientific research on human interrelationships (1970: 13–14).

Other explanations may be advanced for the state of backwardness that characterises the human and social sciences, along with the extremely complex nature of their subject. The relatively recent development of these disciplines means that their 'elements of reality' are still insubstantial in their cognitive experience, namely the set of empirical generalisations theoretically sustained and provisionally accepted by the scientific community, which could make the starting point of research more solid and stable. The imbalance between the low level of knowledge of the human sciences and the great complexity of social processes forces the researcher to make an imaginative effort far greater than that required in the natural sciences. Conceptual innovation and scientific progress – Elias writes (1970: 124–125) – are produced only through this act which I would call *bridging*, a necessary act for linking up the object of research with 'fantasy elements' capable of giving shape and meaning to empirical findings. This is a process that has accompanied the entire (still) brief history of the social sciences, and that has long made fantasy knowledge and real knowledge indistinguishable from each other:

Seen without the evolutionary context, fantasy knowledge and reality-congruent knowledge may appear merely as polar antagonists. It is only by presenting them in their evolutionary context that one becomes aware of the kinship between fantasy knowledge and reality-oriented knowledge as manifestations of the same evolutionary stage (Elias 1989: 159) [22],[#N22].

When, in 1988, Elias dictated these pages to his assistant, the 'great transformation' produced by the process of industrialisation was by then complete, leading (temporarily) to the moral and material dominance of what I would call 'mechanical rationality'; the latter term being used here to also evoke the process that characterises industrial society, namely mechanisation, where technology and science dominate [23][#N23]. In this 'evolutionary stage' of the human sciences, fantasy elements have been reduced and have lost many of their mythical, magical-religious features, becoming, so to speak, *secularised*. The transformation of the world produced by the process of industrialisation shows society in its (provisional) nudity, stripped of the trappings of fantasy that were hiding it from view. We are at that stage in which 'the older *standards* have been called into question but solid new ones are not yet available'. Mankind finds itself deprived of its old certainties, the air is filled with questions, and many are beginning 'to ask for reasons where their fathers saw no reason to ask' (1939: 483) [24][#N24]. This does not mean that the role of fantasy in the cognitive process is of minor or no importance. On the contrary, it has become stronger for two different but complementary reasons. First, because secularisation and rationalisation have heightened the affinity between fantasy knowledge and real knowledge, so that the maieutic capacity of the former has notably increased, becoming an interpretive key that can open the treasure chest of social knowledge with less difficulty. Second, because when everything comes into question, when the time comes to understand the world that is advancing, we inevitably resort to *new and original* elements of fantasy; the latter being the result of an innovative and imaginative effort to which it is necessary to resort, because the traditional tools for interpreting reality are no longer adequate. The effort is much more prodigious and fraught with danger because social representations are mutating with extreme rapidity. The meaning of such mutations can be grasped only through intuitive processes brought to maturation by the arduous and uncertain work of assembling factual knowledge [25][#N25].

Norbert Elias's sociological imagination

I would like to close this article with some comments more specifically related to Elias's approach to sociology. If the reflections advanced with reference to the human sciences have any basis, they acquire, in my opinion, even greater validity when related to his scientific production. Perhaps even beyond what Elias himself would have been willing to recognise [26][#N26], fantasy and imagination (in the sense adopted here) are strongly present – and systematically utilised – in the practice of his sociological work. Despite the positivist influence (at least in the first phase of his scientific work) and his continual appeal for the 'factual knowledge' that results from vast and serious empirical investigation, Elias *cannot help but* rely heavily on that sociological imagination – founded on the long hard labour of research – because of the need deriving from his very peculiar cognitive style. He accepts, as few do, the challenge that comes from the indomitable complexity of social reality, nor does he submit before the hidden reasons of social processuality [27][#N27]. Never satisfied, he adds one problem onto another, but does not surrender to them. When Karl Mannheim [28][#N28] suggested to him as a topic for his teaching, the *Habilitation* thesis [29][#N29] on nineteenth-century French liberalism [30][#N30], Elias felt the need to go back historically to court society, and to trace the chain of interdependences that linked the present to the past, in order to pinpoint the founding moment of the matters at hand, because – he clearly states – only 'if they are placed in a long-term context' can they yield clarity (1985: 167; also 1936: 6).

Beyond this episode, the whole framework of his sociological projects makes it necessary to resort to imaginative leaps. His sociology faces out upon a virtually limitless space-time frame, where research into interpretive relationships must follow and rejoin long winding paths, in space, time and in the dimensions of

analysis [31][#N31]. In terms of discipline, Elias does not stop – 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 contiguous field of the other human sciences. As we read in his biographical notes:

It was characteristic of a false understanding of professional ethics, I asserted, to maintain that one had to have studied sociology, and nothing but sociology, to become a good sociologist. I sometimes had the impression that it was entirely beneficial to the richness and depth of the sociological imagination if its practitioners had studied something other than mere sociology (Elias 1984c: 4).

The institutionalisation of sociology has undoubtedly had positive aspects and resulted in practical benefits, but, as Elias insists, they 'have also brought with them a certain narrowing of sociology's perspective, a certain impoverishment of its imagination and sensibility (1984b: 50) [32][#N32]

Elias, as is well known, does not give up even before the complex and arduous crossroads between man's social nature and his biological constitution, therefore also overleaping the wall that has historically divided the social sciences from the natural ones [33][#N33]. Lastly, as is clear from his research on time, he introduces into his analysis even data relating to the natural environment, historically and culturally interacting with the human social environment that accompanies it (Elias 1984a; Perulli 1996).

Holding together all these different levels of analysis does not therefore require just immense empirical labour – to which certainly Elias was no stranger – it also requires the exercise of an imaginative capacity which knows how to orient and give voice to such different and disciplinarily articulated findings. Elias proposed resorting to didactic models (of interconnection or of games), expressly in order 'to facilitate a reorientation of our powers of imagination' and 'to unleash' them (1970: 87). It is significant that the fundamental model of Elias's (figurational) sociology is proposed as the result of 'an exercise in sociological imagination which customary forms of thought tend to block' (1970: 68) [34][#N34]. The comparison between the discovery of perspective [35][#N35] and that of figurational theory is significant: like the former, the latter was made possible by overcoming prejudices as deeply rooted in the culture of an era, as in the culture of a discipline. It was necessary to overcome a preconceived judgment for which 'a higher value was implicitly placed on the changeless rather than on the changeable' (1970: 144). Only in that way could one gauge that unfamiliar and constantly shifting terrain which was society. Only in that way could one give an account of its complex four-dimensional architecture [36][#N36], built on the dimensions of space and time, and hold together the individual and society, nature and culture – in a continuous process of invention [37][#N37].

The obstacles of this path are not few, and Elias often cites them: from the inevitable limitations that derive from insufficient tools (linguistic, conceptual, etc.) of analysis inherited from the sociological tradition of his own discipline [38][#N38], to the grandiosity of questions that pose themselves to anyone who sets out to interpret social processes (What is civilisation? How does the society of individuals mutate? How does the temporal model change?). Elias's intellectual curiosity and great freedom of thought led him to face the new and urgent questions that epochal changes have posed to human beings and scholars both in the history and in the sciences of such a highly troubled century as the twentieth: among these, for its dramatic relationship with the very survival of humanity, the question of nuclear war, whether real or threatened. Elias does not shrink from this or other challenges, firm with an unshakable *certitudo salutis* in relation to the justness of his work [39][#N39], but also aware of the objective advantage that comes of a long, full life experience, which offered him more than one occasion to test his extraordinary sociological imagination.

Notes

1. The influence of Comte is no doubt also evident on this point: cf. in particular Lessons 55–60 of his *Course* (1830–1842), where he assigned to sociology the task of coordinating and unifying the results of other sciences. In general the influence of classical sociology on Elias's thought is extraordinary, even though he often seems to ignore it and at times to misinterpret it. But always denouncing the paucity of those scholars who – as unfortunately has become the norm in our scientific community – forgot the 'great intellectual heritage [...] of the great men who during the nineteenth century were developing a science of society', providing interpretations 'which can still be used in an endeavour to build up a scientific analysis of societies' (1970: 28). [↩ \[#N1-ptr1\]](#)
2. Cf. Kilminster 2011: 98. Which perhaps there was if Elias, still in 1980, comes to imputing Giddens with too much deference for philosophy (Mennell 2011). [↩ \[#N2-ptr1\]](#)
3. Actually the relationship between Elias's sociological works and the philosophical tradition remains controversial, feeding a harsh debate. To simplify, there is an opposition between two positions. One that – while recognising the importance of the philosophical tradition in Elias's works (three examples are Goudsblom 1995; Kilminster and Wouters 1995) – make a forceful claim for Elias's break with it. A second position, represented well by Rojek (1986) and Maso (1995), argues that much of Elias's sociology pays, consciously or not, no small debt to philosophy, especially the neo-Kantian school (as regards *On the Process of Civilisation*) and Cassirer's school of symbolic forms (especially in reference to *The Symbol Theory*). The debate still rages, as demonstrated by Dunne's (2014) recent comments and the discussion that arises in *History of the Human Sciences*. [↩ \[#N3-ptr1\]](#)
4. There is an aspect which is often mentioned by Elias, namely that fantasies and beliefs are reinforced by their *collective character*. In our case, these are the 'fantasies and beliefs' of a group – the scientific community – which exerts a very strong influence on the researcher, because her/his destiny (Elias would say: her/his survival) is strictly dependent on it (it is no accident that one of those most deeply rooted sayings in the world of academia and research is *Publish or...perish*). [↩ \[#N4-ptr1\]](#)
5. This process of demagification has also been encouraged by the technological changes that are typical of modern society: the advent of industrial mechanisation, in particular, has annexed space from the elements of fantasy that were dominant in the rural world (cf. Marx 1850). The position expressed by Mennell relates implicitly to this Marxian analysis (1992: 162), according to which in today's complex societies, given their high level of rationalisation, a clear distinction has been made between fantasy and reality. In truth, this can be considered too radical a position, because it underestimates the weight, the diffusion and the indeterminacy of fantastic elements still present in the culture of our societies. [↩ \[#N5-ptr1\]](#)

6. As the author states:

knowledge led to many important discoveries and breakthroughs. Their practical application conferred unprecedented power and prestige upon natural scientists. In this way, little by little, the methods of natural science became venerated as the apotheosis of scientific endeavour (Rojek 1986: 590).

[↩ \[#N6-ptr1\]](#)

7. I refer in particular to the long, intense debate on research methods (*Methodenstreit*) and on value-freedom, which includes among its greatest protagonists Max Weber (1922). [↩ \[#N7-ptr1\]](#)
8. Elias writes:

[Sociologists] used some of the established instruments of the natural sciences such as the concept of a 'natural law' or of 'cause and effect' as it was used in classical mechanics, unchanged in the study of society, without necessarily implying that 'society' was in fact a piece of 'nature' in the same sense as pieces of matter or other objects of the physical sciences (Elias 1960: 38).

↑[#N8-ptri]

9. In regard to Weber, Elias points out more forcefully the need for detachment from oneself. ↑[#N9-ptri]
10. Elias returns incessantly to this crucial point. An unpublished passage from the Marbach Archive is significant in this regard (Elias *undated A*: 4):

do believe that social scientists in contrast to the natural scientists of the comparable early period did not fully realise that no science can come into its own unless its representatives are willing and able to stand up to the established, traditional authorities of their own or any other society [...] I do believe that unless sociologists like all other social scientists try to gain greater autonomy in their work and in their own thinking from those who control thinking in their own society, from the established power grouping in their society, they cannot fulfil their social task.

↑[#N10-ptri]

11. I have deliberately selected, from the vast body of Elias's analyses on this topic, those aspects that are most directly connected to the work of the social scientist and his collective fantasies (*ivi*: 236): in both his individual and professional group activities (*ivi*: 237). Cf. also note 4. ↑[#N11-ptri]
12. Tabboni (1993: 229–30), in the wake of Elias's analyses, emphasises a psychological and psychoanalytical aspect which I have voluntarily neglected here: namely, how fantasy elements, even when driven back by the prevalence of scientific instruments of knowledge of social processes, 'continue to live in the deepest layers of human personality, sometimes still contributing in some measure to carrying forward the research, to overcoming difficulties that seem insurmountable within a completely rationalised and detached analysis'. Elias (1990) returns in another way to these issues in his last reflections on the relationship between sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. ↑[#N12-ptri]
13. Elias harshly rejects any attempt to define his sociology as a 'value-free science'. He writes significantly in 1976: 11:

I am evaluating, but I am evaluating as necessary as the highest value of a sociologist to provide a better knowledge of the social universe in which we live, so that we can act more realistically than we are acting today, that is my value [author's italics].

↑[#N13-ptri]

14. Elias's position calls to mind that of another great social scientist of the twentieth century, Joseph A. Schumpeter, who, starting from a detailed definition of science ('any field of knowledge that has developed specialised techniques of fact-finding and of interpretation or inference') ends up by more simply asserting that 'science is refined common sense' (1954: 6): which I would interpret as the Eliasian *reality-congruent knowledge*. We find explicit confirmations of this interpretation also in the polemical considerations Elias makes on the sociology of everyday life (1978), re-proposed in chapters 12 of *Essays III* (2009b), and keenly

discussed (with conclusions very close to these) in a fine essay by Angela Perulli (2004: 51–53 and footnote 2).[♣] [\[#N14-ptr1\]](#)

15. For example, in the famous episode on the fishermen in the maelstrom (taken from a well-known short story by Poe, 1841), Elias – in reconstructing the interpretive dynamic of the brother who saves himself – speaks of the ‘idea’, the ‘theory’ of discovery: it originates in the hero’s capacity for detachment, but is produced on an emotional terrain and has an intuitive character (1983a: chap. II).[♣] [\[#N15-ptr1\]](#)
16. Even when they conceal themselves under ‘rational’ garments:

the peculiar sterility of many analyses of ideologies largely stems from the tendency to treat them as basically rational structures of ideas coinciding with actual group interests. Their burden of affect and fantasy, their egocentric or ethnocentric lack of reality, are overlooked, for they are assumed to be merely a calculated camouflage for a highly ‘rational’ core (Elias 1970: 23).

Such notation, incidentally, is not very different from Pareto’s derivation but is more likely descended from Freudian rationalisation.[♣] [\[#N16-ptr1\]](#)

17. On the role of utopia (defined as ‘a fantasy image of a society’), and on the important distinction between *wishful* fantasies (images) and *fearful* ones, see his essay on Thomas More (1982: 212, 214).[♣] [\[#N17-ptr1\]](#)
18. We are, as is clear, not very far from the position Weber argued in speaking to the ‘free students’ in 1917 (Science as a Vocation 133): ‘an “idea” is prepared only on the soil of very hard work.’[♣] [\[#N18-ptr1\]](#)
19. Even on a stylistic level, he constantly uses the noun or verb (image, imagine) to advance hypotheses or theories.[♣] [\[#N19-ptr1\]](#)
20. This interpretation is only possible by resorting to complex imaginative exercises:

it is not easy to develop one’s own imaginative capacity that one is able to think in figuration, and, moreover, in figurations whose normal characteristics include a tendency to change, sometimes even in a specific direction (Elias 1968: 527).

[♣] [\[#N20-ptr1\]](#)

21. It is interesting how Elias (1983a: 12) illustrates this claim by invoking a French proverb that uses the verb ‘jump’ (*réculer pour mieux sauter*).[♣] [\[#N21-ptr1\]](#)
22. See on this point Linklater and Mennell (2010: 388, note 16), who cautiously soften the Eliasian position speaking of *relatively more* reality-congruent knowledge, and referring to Elias 1983a; 2009a.[♣] [\[#N22-ptr1\]](#)
23. As Marx had already noted in *Grundrisse*, the advent of machines renders the system of domination and more generally the relationship with the world, clearer, more comprehensible, more rational.[♣] [\[#N23-ptr1\]](#)
24. As is known, we are in the presence of evaluations common to other nineteenth and twentieth century social scientists, involved in comprehending the birth and emergence of industrial society. One thinks of course of Marx’s *Manifesto* and Marshall’s *Principles*, but also Durkheim’s *Suicide* and especially Dahrendorf’s *Sociology and Industrial Society*.[♣] [\[#N24-ptr1\]](#)
25. Note that, according to Elias, logic figurations are constantly changing, and that therefore these conditions (cognitive favor or disfavor) are always present, although in variable degrees: higher when motion is fast and widespread, lower when it is slow and limited.

For a rich and articulated discussion of Eliasian 'methodologies', confronted with the modern social science research methods, see the excellent essay by Baur and Ernst (2011). A good attempt to apply a figurational sociological approach to a case study (the global diffusion of baseball) is that of Daniel Bloyce (2004). ↗[#N25-ptr1]

26. Throughout his life Elias led a battle for the affirmation of sociology as an empirical science of equal dignity with the natural sciences and freed from the harmful influences of philosophy. This battle made him, in my opinion, extremely cautious in recognising the importance of intuitive and imaginative elements in the cognitive process, which nevertheless must have been evident to him. ↗[#N26-ptr1]
27. In this, Elias is very close to the Weber of the unintentional consequences of action, with however the important emphasis of the reciprocal interdependence of human actions (the emphasis is present in Weber, although Elias – wrongly – denied it: see 1970: 111–113). It suffices to read this passage, not surprisingly emphasised by Elias's own italics:

It is perfectly possible that by their own actions, groups of people consciously orientated towards preserving and maintaining the present figuration in fact strengthen its tendency to change. It is equally possible for groups of people consciously orientated towards change just to strengthen the tendency of their figuration to remain as it is (1970: 142).

The paragraph is also referred to as the central point of the book in Dieter Claessens' brief but lucid preface to the Italian translation (1990). ↗[#N27-ptr1]

28. At Heidelberg Elias had formed a friendship with Karl Mannheim – only four years his senior but already *Privatdozent* – whose assistant he became in 1929 when he obtained the chair of Sociology at Mannheim at Frankfurt. ↗[#N28-ptr1]
29. Elias's candidacy had been accepted by Alfred Weber, Max's younger brother. ↗[#N29-ptr1]
30. The study thus followed Mannheim's on conservatism: cf. Elias 1986. ↗[#N30-ptr1]
31. If society is complex, Elias argues, it cannot be simplified or broken down for analytical or didactic convenience, as happens normally in sociological research and teaching, which focus separately on the macro and micro levels, with no attempt to integrate them:

If we look at the current way of teaching sociology, there is often no clear relationship between the small-scale sociological studies and theories of classical sociologists whose frame of reference was mankind's long-term development. In manuals and courses we often find them side by side without any relationship. And this lack of integration is even more striking when we consider the few attempts to reason about large-scale sociological systems that have been made in our times, in comparison with the dominant type of small-scale empirical studies (Elias 1960: 4).

↗[#N31-ptr1]

32. In not very different terms Elias expressed himself in *A Diagnosis of Present-day Sociology*: emphasising significantly, among the disadvantages of professionalisation, 'a certain narrowing of view, a routinisation of method and a restriction of imagination, a fear of innovation' (1983b: 100). ↗[#N32-ptr1]
33. Elias ventures several times onto this terrain: see for example his unpublished *An Essay on Laughter* (1956b); on which see Schröter 2002. This essay has achieved a certain celebrity despite remaining unpublished because of its unfinished quality; it begins clearly enough, but peters out in a mass of

handwritten corrections. Incidentally, this and other essays also testify to a particular taste for difference and strangeness. In the belief, as expressed in the passage of an interview, that only in this way can one innovate oneself in one's own discipline: 'I have always worked on strange topics: that is how you make discoveries, not necessarily following the usual binary' (Elias 1986, my translation). [↑\[#N33-ptri\]](#)

34. Less convincing is the effective parity that Elias explicitly establishes between figurational model and game model (1970: 127) – where the latter surprisingly presents itself with aspects of excessive and basically ahistorical formalisation. [↑\[#N34-ptri\]](#)
35. Discovery, the meaning of which the young Elias already sought to identify in his dissertation project in view of his habilitation with Alfred Weber. The meaning is easily translated into Leonardo Da Vinci's motto, *Sapervedere* (Knowing how to see), which Elias had already long made his own. [↑\[#N35-ptri\]](#)
36. Elias actually adds – but 'only at the human stage' – a fifth dimension: the symbolic world of language and communication. This fifth dimension becomes visible only to 'human beings who are capable of synthesis and so are in a position to picture simultaneously in their minds events that happen one after another and thus never exist simultaneously' (1984a: 24, 29; see also 1989: 155). [↑\[#N36-ptri\]](#)
37. It is significant that in his language there is a recurrence of such courageously all-encompassing terms as 'social universe' to define the cognitive objective of sociology (Elias 1976: 11). [↑\[#N37-ptri\]](#)
38. Elias writes:

We might consistently try to free the current stock of language and knowledge, now used to extend our understanding of human networks and social figurations, from heteronomous models of speaking and thinking. We might try to substitute more autonomous models for them. Yet any such attempt would at present be doomed to failure(1970: 15).

Unless, I add, we also resort for these matters to what is suggested by the sociological imagination. [↑\[#N38-ptri\]](#)

39. Thus Elias expresses himself:

Writing for so many years without stirring any echo is a very strange experience, trusting only in your own certainty that you are on the right track without deriving the force that comes from the feedback of others. Thus I've gone forward ever unhesitant because I knew I was on the right track. And I'm still convinced of it (Elias 1986: my translation).

[↑\[#N39-ptri\]](#)

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