

Book Reviews

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Norbert Elias as Social Theorist: Figurational Sociology and its Applications

Akira Ohira (editor)

Tokyo: DTP Publishing, 2014, ¥ 2,900 pbk, ISBN: 9784862113955

Reviewed by: Debbie Kasper, Hiram College, USA

Having died in 1990, Norbert Elias had already been gone a decade by the time I met him, but that didn't get in the way of our developing an ongoing and fruitful (albeit one-way) relationship. I was a graduate student at Penn State then, with the rare opportunity to take a second contemporary theory course with well-known bibliophile, Alan Sica. Elias (via the reader *On Civilization, Power, and Knowledge*) was among the dozen or so authors we encountered. Alan could not have known it then, but he was abetting serendipity in a big way. The pages I dog-eared and the passages I marked back in 2000 represent themes which have been fundamental to the development of my thinking about human social life and which continue to shape my approach to teaching and doing sociology.

Because of this, I very much appreciate the editor's aims for *Norbert Elias as Social Theorist*. Ohira's stated goals are to emphasize the multi- and inter-disciplinary elements of Elias's theory and, in particular, to offer Japanese and Asian university students access to Elias's figurational theory, showing how difficult and important questions about human life (about societal development, conflict, social change, and the formation of lifestyles, beliefs, and ideologies, for example) can be better understood and answered through the examination of dynamic relations of interdependence over the long term. Generally speaking, the book achieves these goals. The chapters cover a wide range of topics across multiple disciplines. Most of them make use of key concepts from Elias's work to explore these topics. All of them emphasise the need to examine dynamic interdependence over time. The particular contributions of the book's chapters to its overall goals, however, are somewhat uneven.

Accessibility is one variable. Linklater's chapter, for example, which sets out to consider how 'Elias's writings contribute to understanding international relations' (1), seems more suited for specialists. His main points are that: international relations are important aspects of contemporary figurations, the civilising process is evident in them, and striving toward a higher degree of detachment is a worthy goal. No problems there. It is in the development of his arguments, via discussion of the 'English School' and comparisons of Elias's reflections on world politics with 'realism', 'neo-realism', and 'structural realism', that someone not immersed in the jargon of international relations theory, nor familiar with its (presumably) key authors (e.g., Waltz), is at risk of getting lost. A bit more background would have been helpful for orienting such a reader. Regardless, Linklater does highlight valuable points of intersection between Elias's work and international relations scholarship – drawing interesting parallels between things like 'involvement and detachment' and 'the security dilemma'. For people in the field, there is surely much to consider.

Waddington, on the other hand, in setting out to demonstrate the useful contributions of figurational sociologists to the study of sport, offers an overview that renders his chapter user-friendly for the uninitiated. His particular interests here lie in the use of figurational sociology to understand the relationship between sport and violence. One comes away having learned many interesting things and seeing not only how Elias's work offers insights into developments in sport and violence, but also how studies of sport and violence can facilitate a greater appreciation of Elias's theory of the civilizing process. The same can be said for the chapters by Sterenberg (on the Annales School and the revival of narrative), Snowden (on language and symbols), Manning (on social identity), Hughes (on smoking and e-cigarettes), and Ohira (on the Japanese civilising process). They all kindly provide the context necessary to appreciate the arguments being made. In each case, the authors tell a compelling story and offer fascinating facts which not only hold a generalist reader's interest, but elucidate the value of certain aspects of Elias's work for these various topics.

Snyder's chapter diverges, not in the extent to which it is interesting (his recounting of the history of Christmas season merrymaking is especially intriguing), but in how centrally Elias figures into its main arguments. The trouble with it, in the context of this book, is that Snyder seems to have written it without Elias in mind, and then tacked him on as an afterthought. Illustrating the consumerist nature of U.S. culture, Snyder introduces his basic argument: things were not always this way. He adds that it might be instructive to examine this 'in terms of the ideas expressed in Norbert Elias's theory of the civilizing process' – that historical change is neither random nor rationally planned. With the exception of one passing reference, there is no further mention of Elias for nearly 20 pages until, in what appears to be the conclusion, Snyder includes a quote from *The Civilizing Process* about how long-term changes and patterns are not planned by any one person. The only connection he makes between this idea and the research presented is in a question about whether 'Americans' consumer desires can ever be subordinated to larger needs through conscious political action' (p. 54). In a book about applications of Elias's theory, this seems like a place to begin rather than end.

Overall, most of the chapters are pleasant to read, with many interesting insights on offer in the context of the diverse topics covered. Their value, however – for fostering a greater appreciation for the relevance of Elias's work across the disciplines – is obscured by two problems. First, idiosyncrasies in style and formatting across the chapters detract somewhat from the potential coherence of project, as a whole. There are inconsistencies, for instance, in the basic structure of the chapters. Some include abstracts, others have introductions, and still others simply begin. References appear at the end of some chapters, while others cite sources within endnotes. And within those, there are some discrepancies between in-text citation and references of key sources (e.g., Niessenbaum in Snyder).

A more substantial problem, though, is the timidity of the conclusions in most chapters. There's a certain kind of anticlimacticism, for example, in the reader's arc of eagerly learning about the history of the Annales School and the politics driving the pendulum swing toward and away from the narrative, only to reach the concluding 'lesson' that advances in scholarship are often the result of a combined scholarly commitment to 'disciplinary distinctives' and 'an attitude of epistemic openness' (Sterenberg, p. 68). Or to find, after delving into the concept of social identity, that 'Elias deserves to be respected as one of the major social thinkers of the twentieth century' (Manning, pp. 91–2). The feebleness of some of the concluding remarks, in some ways, has the effect of weakening what came before.

Several conclusions echo the general theme that the lens of the civilising process – the work by far given the most attention in this collection – is helpful for understanding other phenomena (Waddington, Manning, Hughes, Ohira). Manning further suggests that Elias provides a model and a methodology through which we can approach complex issues of human relationships. I do not disagree. But even if the book generally succeeds at the goal of elucidating 'aspects of Elias's distinctive sociological conceptualization' (p. iv), that

does not necessarily translate into success with the additional stated goal of passing on these assets so that younger generations can ‘continue to develop Elias’s figurational sociology’.

The chapters demonstrate well the far-reaching relevance of Elias’s concepts and ideas, and are very likely to whet the appetite of attentive readers. But beyond the implied suggestion to ‘go read Elias and see’, there is little to guide the reader about what to do with Elias’s work or how to contribute to its advancement. This book is a lovely addition to the collection of works demonstrating the wide applicability of Elias’s figurational sociology. At some point, however, those who believe that Elias offers a useful sociological theory must do a better job of showing more clearly what it is and how it can be more systematically conveyed and used. That means going beyond *The Civilizing Process* – itself only one application of an even more general theory – to provide an overarching framework for understanding human social life and the mechanisms of social change. When we begin to see books and papers that do that more effectively, we will be on our way to facilitating meaningful advancements in figurational sociology. Then, discoveries of the value of Elias’s work need no longer rely on serendipity alone.

Emotion, Habitus und der erster Weltkrieg

Helmut Kuzmics & Sabine A. Haring

Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2013, €69.99, ISBN: 9783847101185, 607 pp.

Reviewed by: Behrouz Alikhani, Westphalian Wilhelms University in Muenster, Germany

This book is a successful transdisciplinary synthesis between different academic disciplines, such as history, sociology, political sciences, social psychology and psychology. In the introduction of the book, the authors begin with a critique of the dominant structural functionalist, Marxist and post-structuralist theories with their explanation of ‘the European modernity’ without taking into consideration the First World War as a constitutive element of European identity in the twentieth century. The study of this ‘forgotten’ major event had not taken place in the centre of the sociological reflections in order to figure out long-term structural developments which led to the First World War, the same structural peculiarities which made the Second World War also possible. According to the authors, even for contemporary Austria, this war remains vivid in their ‘cultural memory’ (p. 15). This reference could have been more elaborated, though this is not the main focus of this study.

Kuzmics and Haring address, among other things, a question they consider a ‘mystery’: how was it possible that different groups in the Habsburg Monarchy fought a war which was not in their national interests? (p. 54). If their motives were not ‘rational’, which ‘irrational’ feelings and emotions underlined their actions? They try, in seven chapters, to find access to the social habitus of the involved individuals, by going back centuries before the outbreak of this war, in order to understand and explain the structure of an event considered unstructured. The first chapter is the collaboration of the two authors. The second, third, fourth and seventh chapters are written by Helmut Kuzmics, and the fifth and sixth chapters by Sabine A. Haring.

The framework of the sociological conceptualisation is not limited to internal state developments. They are doing a sociological study of the long-term dynamics of interstate relationships. The sociology of emotion is taken as the main point of view to understand and explain war as a highly emotional phenomenon. With the aid of this approach, they create a sociologically important connection between social events and the single individuals as the carriers of these events. In the introduction of the book, they explain the importance of their emotion-sociological approach. Methodologically, the studies of Norbert Elias, particularly his study *On*

the Process of Civilisation, are taken as the main conceptual inspiration (p. 44). However, they go beyond Elias and try to verify the theories of Elias based on new examples and by dealing with other sociological concepts. By doing so, they further critically develop the process- and figurational-sociological theory as an open theoretical-empirical approach.

The long term elaboration of the transition of Habsburg officer habitus, from a feudal-aristocratic to a more professional and 'rational' type, should serve as empirical evidence of the close connection between the sociogenesis and psychogenesis of social developments with the long-term processes of state formation. A wealth of literary sources of Habsburg officer habitus are used to work out 'we-feelings', 'images of the enemy' and 'hostility' within the Habsburg Monarchy (pp. 137–67). These feelings and images, developed over centuries, could be intensified and reinforced through deliberate and targeted propaganda (p. 274). The sources for the elaboration of these feelings and images entail not only various autobiographical manuscripts, but also records and novels. Especially, the use of regimental history is considered as an important source of investigation for sociologists of emotion, by studying the military habitus of officers in the Habsburg Monarchy (p. 362). This detailed elaboration of patterns of feeling and conduct of warriors is reminiscent of the similar study of Norbert Elias, *Studies on the Germans*.

In chapter six, Sabine Haring takes two very important and seemingly universal concepts of war – 'fear' and 'hero' – to demonstrate which reality these concepts symbolically represented during the First World War. This method of 'concept analysis' should provide access to the patterns of emotions of warriors in this war even after more than a century. The same above-mentioned materials serve as the empirical basis of her investigation as well. The self-experience and self-perception of the soldiers and their world view is very well illustrated.

In the seventh and last chapter of the book, Kuzmics deals with three principal and controversial questions which he tries to answer in the following pages (p. 493):

1. Why do wars happen?
2. Is there a specific habitus, some 'cultural conditioning', which makes war possible (as Norbert Elias implies) or is war the result of a specific state-organised structure of situational circumstances (in reference to Randall Collins)?
3. Is 'modernity' more civilised than the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age or is it even more ambivalent and dangerous, in the way Bauman claims?

This systematic and extensive theoretical-empirical study could also methodologically serve as an example for studying the military habitus of warriors and soldiers in differently structured societies. It offers a number of conceptual instruments. There are structurally similar concepts for the people considered within the scope of identification and those outside, described as 'they'. Concepts used in relation to people within these boundaries include 'selflessness', 'comradeship', 'friendship', 'trust', 'openness', 'pride', and 'affectively charged sympathies'; and concepts towards the people outside this scope include 'contempt', 'treason', 'disgust', 'revulsion', 'rage', 'anger', and 'revenge' (p. 282–307). However the degree, intensity and type of these feelings and emotions could vary from society to society. All in all, these polarised concepts make the legitimisation of exercising violence in the eyes of affected people possible.

This book is recommended not only to people who are interested in the study of wars, particularly the First World War, but also to those who are looking for a deeper understanding of the methodology of sociological investigations of long-term processes.

