

# Civilised Provocations in the Lion's Den: Norbert Elias on Racism, Assimilation and Integration: The Prinsenhof Conference, Amsterdam 1984 [1] [#N1]

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*On 26–27 January 1984, the City Council of Amsterdam organised a grand conference against discrimination and racism, on the occasion of what was widely seen as ‘the first racist murder’ in the Netherlands and ‘race riots’ in the Brixton area of London around the same time. A wide range of well- and lesser-known speakers contributed. One of them was Norbert Elias – for whom this was supposedly his first and last appearance in policy-making circles. In some respects Elias’s observations were ahead of their time.*

On 20 August 1983, a fifteen-year-old Dutch-Antillian boy was stabbed in the Dam Street in Amsterdam by a sixteen year-old skinhead. [2] [#N2] The mortally injured victim, Kerwin Duinmeijer, ran to a taxi at Dam Square, where the driver refused to take him. After a second driver called an ambulance, the boy died on his way to the hospital. The large societal unrest this incident aroused came on top of a broader climate of uneasiness in the 1980s. There was a severe economic crisis, with high unemployment (especially among young people) and a variety of related issues, such as a housing shortage, criminality and drug problems, but also moral confusion and a sense of ‘deterioration’ in general. [3] [#N3]

In public debate, the advent of migrant workers (invariably called ‘foreigners’) was defined as a problem almost from that point onwards: on the left of the political spectrum, among the various action groups and civic organisations, in the form of fear of discrimination and racism; on the extreme right, as a quite fierce conflict with ‘aliens’. During elections for the City Council and Parliament (both in 1982), several extreme right-wing parties and action groups mobilised. In their programme for the Amsterdam Council, the nationalistic Centre Party (Centrum Partij, CP) articulated the mood undisguisedly: ‘Amsterdam is no longer the city of vigour, culture and sociability, but the capital of crime and heroin.’ They immediately linked public dilapidation to ‘socialist’ politics (the Den Uyl cabinet of those days), which was held responsible for inviting ‘180,000 Surinamese into the Netherlands’. [4] [#N4] Two years later, a branch of the wholesale company Makro, also active in South Africa, was the target of a bombing claimed by ‘RaRa’ (Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action). Two years after that, the CP leader Hans Janmaat was attacked with tear gas.

The parallel with the situation in the London district of Brixton was easily drawn. Between 1976 and 1983 the so-called ‘race riots’ resulted in about 70 murders. There black young men came to blows with the police. They rebelled against not only the fierce *stop and search* actions of the authorities, but even more against unemployment and a bleak future. Not uncommonly they were accompanied by white sympathisers. To put it in an Eliasian way, they all faced an ‘excess of expectations’.

Against this background, Professor Norbert Elias was invited to speak about the tense relationships between, in his idiom, the established and the outsiders. The officer who approached him referred to Elias’s book of that title, which had been published in a Dutch translation a few years before. [5] [#N5] Elias was by then already

a well-known sociologist, certainly at the University of Amsterdam, but also among a broader audience (as can be gathered from the attention given to him in newspapers in those days, including a long interview with Elias the day after the conference in *NRC Handelsblad*). [6].[#N6]

It is worthwhile to picture the atmosphere of that time, if only for the strained way one's words were weighed. Not only were 'race' or references to 'ethnic minorities' considered improper, the conference organisation even rejected 'natives and immigrants' (*autochtonen* and *allochtonen* in Dutch). When mayor Ed van Thijn opened the conference for 'the Amsterdam and new Amsterdam people', he was greeted with a loud boo: stating that the Netherlands faced an 'ethnic taboo' is nothing said too much. [7].[#N7]. In these surroundings, Elias delivered a lecture that was as concerned as detached; almost at the start he rejected the idea of 'racism', but he did speak about 'indigenous people' and even 'negroes'. [8].[#N8]

As far as can be reconstructed, the audience consisted not only of Elias's colleagues, social scientists and some journalists, but also members of civic organisations – including 'foreigners'. The conference after all was initiated to raise a fist against xenophobia, to stop the 'ethnic prejudices' of the police and taxi drivers, but most of all to bring about the prohibition of the Centre Party (which did not happen). Given this backdrop, it is almost astonishing not only what Elias presents to his listeners, but also that they treated him most respectfully, for he actually found himself in the lion's den.

Although in *The Established and the Outsiders* Elias had already elaborated on tensions between groups and communities, he never explicitly referred to non-Western migrant workers and the problems they and their counterparts faced. This book can still be perceived as the touchstone of a figurational approach to the tensions and conflicts between 'new' and 'old' Europeans. But at the conference it was probably the first and last time Elias reflected not only on current affairs and the Dutch relationship with Moroccans, Turks, Surinamese and Moluccans, but also on politics – 'what can be done?' is in fact the thread of his argument. Of course he immediately distanced himself by gently underlining that he was not a politician, but rather saw himself as a doctor giving a diagnosis.

Calling the term racism 'utterly misleading', and offering at the same time two rather blunt solutions for the tensions between the established and the outsiders – it was nothing less than a civilised provocation. Elias said he was aware his 'therapeutic suggestions' could cause trouble. According to him there were two scenarios for the 'outsiders': either form their own state or assimilate and integrate. He favoured the second, although he emphasised that it would take a serious effort (identification) from both sides. Also interesting is the more 'relatively autonomous' dimension he brought in: the national habitus as indicator of the success of 'absorbing' immigrants. 'Mutual admiration societies' like Germany or England perform better so to speak than 'a mutual denigration society' like the Netherlands. Elias warned against overly optimistic expectations: integration is really a long-term process. It may take three to four generations.

In retrospect, this recipe does not sound very original, but at that time Elias may well have been the first [9] [#N9] to suggest the option of integration (or assimilation, which is almost synonymous for him) instead of 'living apart together'. In his brief programme, political and educational participation plays a key role, more than giving up one's own 'previous identity'. For his audience, and the city administration as well, encouraging people to maintain their 'own language and culture' was at that time the cornerstone of coping with newcomers and the holy principle of a vast 'policy on minorities'. 'To strive for integration', as a report from another lecture (on national anti-discrimination policy) concludes, 'may and can absolutely not be a means to fight racism.' [10].[#N10]

Elias's lecture is remarkable in another way. It was only a few years before that that the man who now denied [11].[#N11] the primary relevance of racism was himself accused of almost being a racist. This happened

not in the lion's den, but so to speak on his own turf, the University of Amsterdam. It was in 1981 that the Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok insinuated that Elias should not be surprised if he were accused of racism, [12],[#N12] during a multi-day academic conference about the use and value of the theory of civilising processes for the whole forum of social scientists and historians. In fact, the question was raised as to whether civilisation theories and processes could be applied to the anthropological study of stateless societies. But in the end the discussion became mired in confusion over the *emic* and *etic* use of the term 'civilisation'.

At the 1981 conference Elias was the keynote speaker. He gave a lecture on pacification. The next day, in the afternoon session reserved for the anthropologists, Blok launched a 'fundamental, emotional and moving' attack on Elias, whom he had once admired, by designating the civilisation theory 'ethnocentric'. [13],[#N13] A heated debate followed, as later this whole argument was convincingly refuted. [14],[#N14] Elias himself, as far as is known, mostly shrugged his shoulders. But during the Prinsenhof conference, three years later, he implicitly dismantled the accusation of racism by stating that differences in behaviour and mentality can never be reduced nor traced to genetic traits.

The 'Prinsenhof lecture [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0005.103>]', as here transcribed, contains no breaking news for those familiar with Elias's work; nevertheless, it contains many perceptive observations and raises sagacious questions which were not only ahead of their time – and in fact the lecture is 'prophetic' where he touches upon the threat of violence – but are also valuable for our own tangled time. The whole debate on the integration of non-Western immigrants and Muslims – including the struggle with 'incorrect' language and the ideological distinction between 'integration' and 'assimilation' – had yet to start. Elias's broad and comparative approach is as always refreshing and inspiring, certainly for scholars and others who take an interest in complex figurations and 'integration conflicts'. [15],[#N15]

## Endnotes:

1. Thanks to Joop Goudsblom for his comments on an earlier version and thanks to Stephen Mennell for correcting my English. ♣ [1],[#N1-pt1]
2. The lawyer deemed it not proven that the perpetrator killed Duinmeijer intentionally (*Leeuwarder Courant*, 1984). It was, by the way, not the first 'racist' murder in the Netherlands; in 1977 the Turk Ibrahim Uysal was thrown into an Amsterdam canal where he drowned. ♣ [2],[#N2-pt1]
3. Cf. Post (2004). ♣ [3],[#N3-pt1]
4. Appendix 1 of the Amsterdam Archive 4 and 5 May Committee (1984). The programme of the even more notorious Nederlandse Volks Unie [Dutch People's Union], NVU, was equal to that of the Centre Party, but was the first to emphasise 'the conservation of Dutch culture and identity' – which has since become a rather mainstream idea of not only populist parties. ♣ [4],[#N4-pt1]
5. Elias and Scotson (1976). ♣ [5],[#N5-pt1]
6. Smeets (1984). ♣ [6],[#N6-pt1]
7. Vuijsje (1997, 25–27). Vuijsje indicates that the 'policy on minorities', which was at its peak in the 1980s, paradoxically fostered what it was meant to prevent: minorities were seen first and foremost as members of an ethnic group. This resulted in the Eliasian *double bind* that the Dutch majority was told (by amongst others mayor Van Thijn) on the one hand to respect every difference, and on the other hand to take great care to deny the same differences to prevent any form of discrimination. See also Dalal (2012). ♣ [7],[#N7-pt1]

8. It must be remembered that what counts as 'politically correct' vocabulary changes rapidly over time. 'Negroes' was a polite and acceptable word not very long ago. For example, it is used throughout the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1975). See Mennell (2007: xii). ♣ [#N8-ptri]
9. It was the left-wing journalist Herman Vuijsje (1986) who first warned publicly about the disadvantages of too much 'caution' in dealing with minorities. In the early 1990s, Frits Bolkestein, leader of the Dutch liberals (VVD), pointed in almost the same direction – albeit as a plea for Western 'superiority', for which he was massively criticised. Nine years later, the Dutch publicist Paul Scheffer repeated the need for integration in his piece 'The Multicultural Tragedy' [Het multiculturele drama]. ♣ [#N9-ptri]
10. Verslag Landelijke Overheid (1984). This aversion to integration was not exceptional among left-wing parties, such as the Socialist Party (SP). ♣ [#N10-ptri]
11. What creates 'tension and irritation is not the form of the face or the skin color, but the form of behaviour, something learned. The form of behaviour and feeling, of sentiment, is different in the immigrant groups to that of the established groups [...].' ♣ [#N11-ptri]
12. 'If someone says such a thing, he shouldn't be surprised when he takes the blame of racism' in response to Elias's remark about African (stateless) communities who used to live 'like wild animals in the jungle, always in danger of being caught' (in: Blok 1982: 205). The conference as mentioned was organised by the working group Figurational Sociology of the Dutch Sociological and Anthropological Association on 17–18 December 1981 in Amsterdam. Unsurprisingly it was Hans Peter Duerr (1988 III: 463) who, as part of his critique of the theory of civilising processes, referred to exactly the same sentence of Elias, thereby ascribing him a sense of superiority like 'Victorian colonial lords' [*viktorianischen Kolonialherren*] and arguing that it showed how Elias believed in the 'animal-like nature of negroes' [*tierähnlichen Negeratur*]. ♣ [#N12-ptri]
13. Wilterdink (1982: 577–79). ♣ [#N13-ptri]
14. Goudsblom (1984); Israëls (1983); Zwaan (1983); Wilterdink (*ibidem*, 581) points out that Elias aimed with his comparison for 'the social conditions' under which people in non-pacified societies had to live. ♣ [#N14-ptri]
15. Elias (1974). ♣ [#N15-ptri]

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## Biography

Arjan Post (1972) studied cultural sociology at the University of Amsterdam and works as an independent editor for literary publishing houses. As a journalist he has written many articles and interviews on multicultural society and its discontents. His thesis was a follow up of the study Brinkgreve and Korzec (1978) carried out on a Dutch advice column ('Margriet Weet Raad'); it resulted in articles in *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* (27 (4) 2000) and *Irish Journal of Sociology* (13 (2) 2004). He is currently working on a study of integration conflicts from an Eliasian perspective (working title: *The Integration of Mankind*).

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