

The Prinsenhof Lecture: Transcript of Norbert Elias's contribution to the Prinsenhof Conference against Racism and Discrimination, Amsterdam 26 January 1984 [1] [#N1]

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A recent English report on race relations in Great Britain has expressed anxiety that the polarisation between minority groups and the majority groups [is] increasing. That means that the natives of England are closing their doors to relationships with Asians and Africans or, for that matter, Turks and Spaniards. While the Africans and Asians on their part are increasingly closing their doors too and [resentment at both sides] is increasing.

This trend can be dangerous. It can lead, sooner or later, to violence – even in this country, which is traditionally an opponent of violence. If the crisis increases, if the economic condition of Holland deteriorates, which is not impossible, then the tendency of the majority to resent members of minority groups having jobs while they themselves are unemployed, may increase. And on the other hand, the members of the minority groups are full of growing resentment at having to live in a country that does not really appreciate them, without any future and with no chance or no desire to go back to their country. The danger, as I have said, lies not simply in the conditions as they are; it lies in the dynamics of the situation: in the increasing closure of the native population, of the Dutch population, in the relationships *against* minorities, and the increasing closure of relationships. Those groups sit in their portraits, glaring at each other, resenting each other, and that is a condition which is bound to increase and it is not desirable from either side. [2] [#N2]

That, in a way, one might expect. Because the longer this present situation goes on without anything being done about it, the more likely is it that the tension and the tabooism will harden. There is a certain dynamic in that situation between the indigenous population – in my language, the established – and the outsiders, of which one is not always aware. But perhaps you will allow me in this lecture to do two things. I ask you to accept the fact that I am not a politician and do not approach the problem of the established–outsiders relationship from any political angle. I am interested in the sociological structure. I came by, as if I were a doctor, to give you a diagnosis and to make a few suggestions for a therapy.

If you accept what I have to say in that spirit, the first thing is that the term ‘racist’ is utterly misleading. ‘Let us fight racism’: that looks as if we have to fight an intellectual ideology of certain groups. ‘Let us fight the ideas’: that is what it looks like. But what is really to be investigated is the relationship between two or more groups. Why do they get on each other’s nerves, why the conflict, the hatred, the tensions? One doesn’t need to fight an intellectual idea of racism, but one has to do what a sociologist can do: to diagnose a situation of an unequal power balance. Because that is one of the crucial points of this whole situation between established and outsider groups: one group has greater power chances than the other.

May I illustrate this by saying that what we have to deal with, the problem, has nothing to do with the biological structure of these groups? Racism, or race relations, suggests that there is an encounter between two groups which are biologically different: of different race. It happened that one of my investigations was

made into the relationship between two working class districts in England. [3],[#N3]. One working class district came from the old culture, where people had lived together for three or four generations, in a network of old families, proud of their way of living. Then, at the other side of the railway, there were a lot of 'immigrants' coming from London and other parts of Britain. Now these two groups were the same in terms of race, they were the same in terms of class, they were the same in terms of their nationality. And yet, in relation to the other, newer group, the old established group used exactly the same terms of stigmatisation that one finds everywhere in so-called race relations. There was agreement in all the gossip channels within the older settlement that the newcomers were dirty, that they were unreliable, that their children were not kept in check. Yes, they ought to be, but they were unruly and untrustworthy.

On closer examination little of this corresponded to the reality. There was, it is true, a small minority of the more recently arrived people, families who were what one calls 'disturbed families', where indeed the kitchen was not very clean, and odd smells came from the food and the kitchen was extremely unruly, and so on. The conclusion I drew from this I can give you in one sentence, but I think it is very telling: in such relationships the majority sees itself in accordance with the image of [the minority of] [4],[#N4], the best and sees the outsider group in accordance with the image of [the minority of] the worst. The old established group said all the things that applied to the small minority of the immigrant groups as if it were valid for the whole group. I do not need to stress of course they regarded themselves as superior.

Now here are, as I said, two groups of completely equal characteristics, but one was old and established and the other was new. And yet they used very much the same stigmatising words and had the same feelings of superiority that you find in race relations. But in fact the so-called racial signs, the skin color, the hair form, and whatever it may be, are merely symptoms of established-outsiders relationships. Of course you can more easily recognise the outsiders because they have a different skin color. But let us take for instance the relationship between the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority in America and the negroes. What is important here is that the negroes were the descendants from slaves and were excluded from power, while the white majority kept them at bay, kept them down, kept them where they are. If the negroes in the future became assimilated and acquired equal power access, if there were a black president, then many of these things would change.

I have touched here on a problem that is masked if one speaks of racism. And that is the fact that the major differences between the established and outsiders group, which create 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 from that of the established groups, and that may give rise to an enormous irritation. 'Why can't they behave as we do?' Well, they can't. Because the way one behaves and feels as a Dutchman and Dutchwoman is the result of a long development. It is by no means 'the natural way' or 'the human way' of behaving, it is a particular code of behaviour which has developed over the years. And these people, the immigrant people, come from a group where different standards of conduct and behaviour have developed. What clashes are these two standards of conduct and behaviour. For instance, you all are familiar with the constant reproaches against immigrant groups: 'They are so noisy.' But, for them, their standard of their noise level in their culture may be different to that of the Dutch, the English, or the French. 'They are not clean, their food smells.' Well, they have different food manners and different odors. That is what clashes.

In the fight against these tensions I often hear the idea 'leave the immigrants as they are, that is how they should be, how they want to be'. I think that this attitude is an unrealistic attitude and I will say why. If you leave the immigrants where they are – particularly in a country like Holland where the proportion, the percentage of immigrants is not terribly high, three to four percent, which is really quite manageable – then

they will live in something which one cannot call otherwise than a ghetto. Then they will still be condemned to a sterile hopeless condition, like that for instance of the Moluccan group in Holland at the moment. If immigrant groups condemn themselves to existence in a ghetto, and if the polarisation increases at the same time as it is bound to do, then we sooner or later will have a Turkish ghetto and a Moroccan ghetto.

Having given this brief survey of a diagnosis, I am aware that it might cause trouble if I say that one of the aspects of the therapy should be a degree of assimilation of the immigrant groups. How one brings it about is an open question. That it is a task which will take at least three to four generations, that is to say a long-term task, though that doesn't diminish its urgency. Nor by assimilation do I mean the complete giving up of one's previous identity. The Jews are for example still Jews, and Dutch Jews are Dutch as well. But there are also Jews who, so to say, aren't Dutch at all. This seems to illustrate the urge to foster assimilation of the moderate kind, the temperate kind. That is the main therapeutic task here. There are various reasons for this.

One I will mention in particular. If members of a minority group ever are actively to participate in the political life of Holland, a degree of assimilation is necessary. Because a lively party state is based on a certain unity of conduct and feelings. Different parties must be sure that the other parties stick to the rules of the political game, that they are above all prepared [when an election is lost and they lose power] [5]. [1#N5] to give up the chances of power which governmental office brings to everyone in government. That they give it up and that [there is] this whole confidence. This ultimate confidence [is something that] in multi-party regimes different parties must have in each other ('please show us a certain unity of behaviour'). Of course this does not mean it never can be broken.

I remember, from personal experience, quite well how Hitler from the first moment he was legally sworn into government office, started to dismantle the democratic apparatus, and to use military force, using his private army as well as the commander of the *Reichswehr* to imprison his political opponents. So, breaking the confidence that a lively democracy demands can also be done by others than an immigrant group. Of course I do not say, which would be foolish, that there is any danger that the Moluccans, or the Surinamese, the Moroccans, or the Turks are likely to do that. I only say: assimilation, a certain uniformity of conduct, is necessary in a multi-party state. And the problem is how to bring it about.

I hope you keep in mind what I have said before, that this is not only a requirement to the established majority; it is also a requirement to the minorities themselves. Because, I repeat myself, a ghetto existence is not very nice. Perhaps I should say that in general there are three solutions to such a situation. I mean not only in Holland, but everywhere where there are minority groups: in America, in Vietnam with the Chinese. Everywhere there is the same problem. But there are fundamentally three, actually only two possible solutions. A possible solution is that the despised minority is able to establish its own state somewhere else. It's not yet impossible that negroes in America will somewhere, sometime do such a thing in one of the American states – it's not impossible. The other solution is a higher or lesser degree of assimilation. And the third possibility, which is not a solution at all, is the permanence of the tension and conflict over time. Of course, Surinamese people could go back to their own state, the Moluccans dream they can go back, and the Turks can also go back to their own original state. If that is their desire, then they should do so.

I think that one not only has to make demands on the established group, but one also has to make demands on the outsider group. One has to make clear: if you want to leave, please do so. But if you want to stay here, a degree of accommodation to the Dutch outlook, Dutch manners, and a degree of identification with the Netherlands will be expected of you. There is no reason why there cannot be Dutch Turks or Dutch Moroccans. But one can expect from them a degree of identification, some change of their own social identity.

As I said before, this is a long-term problem. In my model, it takes at least, three generations. The first generation will resist such a demand, in every possible way. And one should have full understanding for this. The second generation will have already visited Dutch schools and will perhaps speak Dutch more or less fluently. But they will still be brought up in a parental home where Turkish or another language is spoken, and so they [live 'in between']. [6]. But the chance – it is only a chance – of really beginning to identify with the Dutch and with the Netherlands starts only in the third generation. That makes any therapy difficult, because one has to think in long-term processes.

Now let me for a moment give you a few examples. As a matter of fact the power to absorb and to assimilate minorities of different nations is rather limited. The Dutch have quite successfully absorbed not only Jews, but also Indonesians for instance. Still there are some tensions on that front. And it still remains to be investigated whether the assimilation of the Indonesians and their integration into Dutch society was more or less successful.

The heart of this process of absorbing minorities lies in the self-image of a nation. There are, as you will know, big differences for instance between the self-image of the French and the English. And the Germans, in accordance with their rather chequered history, had at least in the past very little capacity for absorbing minorities. It's not so well known, but they had some Polish minorities. Yet on the whole they had the idea of German unity, 'we must keep together' and therefore, in connection with their own national image, outsiders were always regarded as dangerous, as threatening the hard-fought-for unity of Germany.

The French national image was formed in the nineteenth century, after the Revolution and under Napoleon, in the middle classes of the nineteenth century. It was less than most other national images and ideologies based on descent, as is the case in countries in which the tradition of aristocracy played a part in forming the national image. Of course the bourgeoisie set considerable store on descent – and in fact, if you will allow me to say not too much, Hitler's ideology was really a [debased] aristocratic ideology of the German people, the German race, as an aristocracy over the whole world. But the French Revolution made the main criterion of Frenchness one of culture, civilisation, not of descent. And that, though I'm afraid it did not help some of their minorities, at least made for a very successful colonial policy. In the colonies they succeeded 'Frenchifying' the elites, because the elites identified themselves with [a 'cultivated'] class. I do not want to go into the details of the British colonial policy.

The number of those who have to be assimilated to the majority is not too high. It remains small compared with the numbers of the majority. But there is one thing – and that is the main reason for this digression – that French and British have in common: to this day they have an immense pride in being French, in being British. The fact that in the meantime both have come down to earth a little has not yet affected their pride in their own nationality and the fact that, if I may express it that way, they are mutual admiration societies: how fine the British are, how fine the French are.

Now that is a great difference to the Netherlands, which has abandoned the whole problem of assimilation. If I may put it in a too pointed way I would say that, while the French and the British are mutual admiration societies, I sometimes have the feeling that the Dutch more resemble a mutual denigration society. [laughter] Because, when this is the case, it becomes difficult to absorb minorities. A certain pride in being Dutch is necessary to pursue such a policy.

Of course all these are topics of which much more could be said, but my time is limited. Will you allow me to make a few suggestions as to what could be done? Therapeutic suggestions, if you want. The suggestions I have to make are difficult to put into practice for two reasons. One is, like all measures, it will take a bit of luck. The second is that this is a task where one cannot expect immediate results. It's a task which requires a

great deal of patience, many failures will go with it. I would call this task, if you like, bridge building. Perhaps one could appoint three or four professional people specially concerned with the task of bridge building between the majority and the minority. Bridge building of this kind requires an effort from both sides. It's not good if the majority alone do it. The question is whether there is any response, whether people on the other side of the river also wish to try to build a bridge.

You can see at once that as things are today, it seems to me from my very insufficient knowledge, such an attempt with the Moluccans would be at the moment rather difficult. [7],[#N7]. But it might not be so difficult with the other minorities. At least one would have to try to experiment. One could try to invite people to one's home or to a restaurant, to give them the feeling that they are not despised, because very often they suffer from their outsider situation and resentment. So, contact with care – not too eagerly, slowly, of one kind or the other, with people whose principle task that is – seems to me a very worthwhile enterprise.

But of course, as I said, one would have to foster desire from the other side to participate in Dutch life. And it is a question that I cannot answer, but which one has to consider: is there any possibility of allowing suitable people from the minority to participate directly in the administrative life of their city, not to say even in Parliament? One could certainly look around to see whether a clergyman or other educated members of the minority could take part, could perform one or two administrative jobs. Bridge building consists in first finding just a very few individuals with whom one can make closer contacts, who will be able to understand from first hand, from their own participation, the problems of the Dutch; and the Dutch will learn better their problems, the problems of minorities. Of course one would not be cagy about the main point. One would always have to say: if you want to go back, go back to your own country. But if you want to stay, you will have to make an effort to be one of us.

Here I think one could proceed on three fronts. I forgot to say it might be useful to open one or two places at universities or technical high schools to members of the minority. They have to discover it, but I think that would be a very important form of bridge building. To have people who are educated at a Dutch university who did not lose contact with their own group: that would form a very important bridge. Such people are needed.

But one would have to proceed on several fronts. One could also look for Dutch women, who can try to make contact, more permanent contact, with Surinamese or Turkish women. I have no illusions about the difficulty of such a task, but it would be worthwhile. And certainly for young people, because the young Dutch people really can do something. As I said before, it is not enough that they simply say they are against racism. It would be good if they tried to form relationships with young people on the other side. Perhaps first with some distance, but in time they might be able to lessen the isolation.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I have given you a diagnosis and a very provisional suggestion of a therapy. And now I expect a very hectic controversy in the discussion. [applause]

Chairman: We are now going to think about our questions and we hope you will write them down, then Professor Elias can answer them. There will be a break for about five or ten minutes. Thank you. [recording paused] We have to answer many questions, so many questions cannot be answered.

Elias: I think I have to limit them. It's a matter of old age. I cannot answer all questions.

C: I'd like to start with the first question: could you explain the difference between assimilation and integration?

E: They go closely together. But, if I may use an example... I would like to remind you that both assimilation and integration apply to the working classes in the nineteenth century, at least in Britain and also Germany.

Like most outsider groups compared with the establishment, the working classes were treated more or less with the same kind of stigmatisation as immigrant groups are treated today. And of course when Disraeli spoke of the 'two nations' [8],[#N8] in Britain he was perfectly right, only the working classes were not exactly a nation. But the gap in behavioural standards and in outlook, and of course in standards of living, were enormous. And in course of time, at least in countries such as Britain, the working classes more or less adopted and have become assimilated to the standards of the so-called 'gentle' classes. That is assimilation. But they also have become integrated into the British state. The working class has hardly been able to govern, but they are no longer outsiders in relation to the state as they were before. So it is not a question of a difference. It is simply that assimilation refers more to the behaviour and feelings of people. They always go together, behaviour and sentiment. Integration means being accepted and accepting identifying completely with the nation. The working classes are fully alive to the fact that they are British and share of course in the mutual admiration society and the pride of being British. [long silence] So there are some more questions? [laughter] So, integration into the state and assimilation of behaviour and people.

C: In your diagnosis you reduce the problem of race relations to a quarrel?

E: I do not see why the seriousness of these conflicts would be greater if it was really a matter of race. I cannot understand that at all. Debating the concept of race does not mean that I in any way regard this as a quarrel between neighbors over where they come from, and I cannot remember having said anything which could make you think that I do not take these quarrels very, very seriously. I have perhaps said enough when I said the alternative to assimilation is that immigrant groups form their own state or go away for lack of acceptance. Why should it be less serious if quarrels and dissensions are socially related? After all, the quarrels and dissensions between Russia and America are also not racial. And yet they seem to me extremely dangerous.

C: One more question, yes? I think it is a very nice question: 'Dear professor, I thought you were a member of a minority group in your own life. Please tell me something of your own experience of integration. What kind of behaviour did work, and what kind of behaviour didn't? Have your feelings of integration in your new culture...'

E: My new...?

C: Culture. That's Holland I think.

E: I see. I feel very much at home here but I cannot integrate because I don't speak the language. The integration in Germany was made easier by the fact that I am probably of the third generation. So I have undergone a process of assimilation, of Jews into German society. I have written about this in 'Notizen zum Lebenslauf', [9],[#N9] which will be published in a short while, of what it feels like to be a member of a minority, and, when I lived as a child in Germany, the feeling of being surrounded by people of whom the majority had very strong anti-Semitic sentiments. But there was one very odd thing in the whole milieu [10],[#N10] in which I lived: no one accepted the stigmatisation. It is quite difficult. No one, my father for instance, would ever take it seriously. He would regard anti-Semites as people of no education. [laughter] And so there was a counter wave which made at least one of the aspects of this serious type of relationship different. Very often, after a while, people who live in a ghetto accept some of the stigmatisation against them. In my book *The Established and the Outsiders*, which I should have ... [apparently looking for a copy to hold up; laughter] I mention the case of a Japanese minority [the Burakumin], which was pure Japanese in descent, but which was concerned with dirty work: leather work, cadavers, and some other things. And their whole conscience had absorbed the negative feeling which the surrounding had about them. There was a famous story of an old man who asked: 'Do you yourself believe you are the same as the Japanese?' And the outsider said: 'I do not know, we are

dirty.’ Now this kind of conscience was never there in the surroundings in which I lived. One always felt as someone whom could be proud of, being both German and Jewish. [*silence*] So, one more?

C: One more? O.K. [*laughter*] If you want to. ‘Why is it easier for groups with a lot of pride in what they are to absorb minority groups?’

E: That’s a very good question. Because one has to give minority groups a kind of reward, an emotional reward, that it is worthwhile assimilating to this particular majority group. And if this majority group looks down on itself ... If a minority group is not given some pride in assimilating to the culture of another group then the process is very difficult.

C: I think there are many more questions to be answered. Maybe next time if we have any luck. Professor Elias, I want to thank you very much for your lecture and for the answers you gave. I think it’s very important to have heard what you have said, and I hope we will do something with it. And, well, I know you like a good wine so [*laughter*] that’s why I wanted to give you some good wine and hope you will drink it. [*applause*]

Endnotes:

1. Thanks to Cas Wouters for the recording. This text is slightly revised: repetitions, anacoluthons and corrected mistakes were deleted; a few sentences were shortened or removed when too many words were unintelligible (because of the tape age, ambient noise, or the speaker’s idiosyncratic diction). Thanks to Stephen Mennell for the final corrections. ♣.[#N1-ptri]
2. These first two paragraphs are most likely to be the missing sentences of the Prinsenhof lecture, of which the recording was probably started too late. On another recording, which I retrieved from the Deutches Literatur Archiv in Marbach, Elias introduces these sentences as a try-out for his lecture: ‘what follows here is a note for the talk on race relations’. At the same time we learn that was the main topic to Elias, not integration in the first place. The recording was filed as ‘*Die Umgang mit Minderheiten*’ (without year); thanks to Stefanie Müller. ♣.[#N2-ptri]
3. Elias and (1965). The Dutch translation was published in 1976. ♣.[#N3-ptri]
4. Elias’s phrasing in *The Established and the Outsiders*. ♣.[#N4-ptri]
5. Elias (2007, 49–50). ♣.[#N5-ptri]
6. Elias literally said ‘tricks in between’; he probably meant something like ‘piggies in the middle’ (thanks, Stephen). ♣.[#N6-ptri]
7. In 1977 a group of nine young Moluccans, striving for an independent republic in the south of the Moluccan islands, hijacked a train in De Punt. Nineteen days later two hijackers and six hostages died during shooting by special forces. In 1975 a similar train hijacking took place in Wijster (like De Punt in the province of Drenthe). On that occasion the driver and two passengers were shot by the hijackers. ♣.[#N7-ptri]
8. In *Sybil, or The Two Nations* the statesman Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81) pointed to the widening gap between the upper class and the working class, as a threat to his ‘one-nation conservatism’. The novel was published in the same year (1845) as Friedrich Engels’s [The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Condition_of_the_Working_Class_in_England_in_1844). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Condition_of_the_Working_Class_in_England_in_1844]. ♣.[#N8-ptri]
9. Elias (1984; 2013). ♣.[#N9-ptri]
10. Elias grew up in German Breslau (nowadays Polish Wrocław), and lived in Heidelberg and Frankfurt before he fled from the Nazis to Paris in 1933. ♣.[#N10-ptri]

References

- N. Elias and J.L. Scotson (1965), *The Established and the Outsiders. A Sociological Inquiry into Community Problems*, New Sociology Library Series, Cass & Company. Dutch: N. Elias and J.L. Scotson (1976), *De gevestigden en de buitenstaanders. Een studie van de spanningen tussen twee arbeidersbuurten*, Aulapocket 582, Het Spectrum, transl. Cas Wouters and Bram van Stolk.
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- Norbert Elias (2013), *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections*, in: *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, Vol. 17, ed. Edmund Jephcott et al., UCD Press.

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