Editors' Introduction: Stephen Mennell – The soci*able* character

Steven Loyal, Barbara Górnicka and Katie Liston

Over a number of cold and wet days in January, sixty academics, friends and colleagues gathered in Dublin's historical Newman House to honour the remarkable and ongoing work of Professor Emeritus Stephen Mennell. Despite his initial worry that few would come, all those touched by what Andrew Linklater refers to as 'the processes of Mennellisation' attended and many others sent messages of goodwill. They travelled from as far as Australia, the USA, Brazil, Turkey, and from all over Western Europe, to be the part of this warm celebration of Stephen Mennell's work. He was described by very many as a mentor, a true friend, known for his fierce loyalty, generosity, warmth and kindness. Supportive of not only his friends but of colleagues in other disciplines, and of many keen young academics, they always felt recognized and rewarded in his presence. It was for some of these sociological and extra-sociological reasons that this special issue takes stock of, reflects upon, and seeks in some small way to honour Mennell's work.

The sociogenesis of the Yorkshire academic

Stephen Mennell was born May 1st 1944 in Manningham in West Yorkshire before moving to Huddersfield at the age of sixteen. The son of a bus conductor, his working class background, containing striking parallels with Hoggart's descriptions, in *Uses of Literacy* (1957), of growing up in Leeds as well as the lives of respondents in Jackson and Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* (1962), strongly shaped his subsequent trajectory and anti-commercial cultural world-view. Studying sociology as a 'minor' part of his Economics degree at Cambridge, he came under the influence of Lockwood, Abrams, Hopper and especially Goldthorpe. The latter's restricted conception of theory was a system of general propositions and initial observations from which to deduce further implications. The idea of empirical–theoretical testing through observation entailed a Popperian philosophy of science and a methodological individualism, which influenced Mennell's own approach and was partly reflected in his *Sociological Theory: Uses and Unities* (1974). However, this book also contained the traces of two other major influences. The first was his yearlong stint at Harvard studying under Parsons, Riesman, Bellah, Homans and especially Herminio Martins, after gaining the Frank Knox Fellowship in 1966. Having gained a position as a lecturer at Exeter upon return from Harvard, the second, and major, influence was his encounter with the work of Norbert Elias during the translation of *What is Sociology?,* published in 1970. It was the third chapter of the book, on game models, which was to have the most profound impact on Mennell's early thought.

The confluences of these three influences are all evident in Mennell's first major work, *Sociological Theory: Uses and Unities*. The book is emphatic in its argument that sociological theory needs to be read, and should develop, only in alliance with sociological research. Mennell has no time for abstract sociological theory; today, problematically institutionalized as part of an intellectual division of labour in what might be best described as social (rather than sociological) theory. 'The real business of sociology', as he put it, 'is empirical research and explaining why society is as it is' (1974:1). It is the status of theory as a body of formalized and

'ultimately testable explanations' that allows sociology to develop cumulative knowledge. Because of a lack of consensus about theory and its' proliferation, it has to some extent remained pre-paradigmatic in the Kuhnian sense. The inevitability of such a fragmentary approach in the discipline has been reinforced by the pessimistic views of some sociologists themselves, such as Alan Dawe in his landmark paper 'The Two Sociologies' (1970). Dawe saw the dichotomy of micro and macro sociological standpoints as insurmountable. For Mennell, whose work is in some ways a polemic against such a resigned position, many of the disputes and conflicts haunting sociological theory such as that concerning consensus and conflict can be resolved at the empirical level.

Sociological Theory is a brilliant early book on the subject. Mennell starts with a 'discussion of the assumptions sociologists need to make about the nature of human action and knowledge' in which 'the chapters become gradually concerned with the structural properties of social systems' (1974: 5). Eschewing approaches that entail 'ancestor worship', sociological theory is instead read through the framework of analytical problems – action, knowledge, social integration, social system and power. It is through the vector of these conceptual problems that he reads sociological schools and assesses their contribution to sociological knowledge. The need to develop sociological theory in tandem with empirical research and practical interests is also expertly demonstrated in his report on *Cultural Policy in Towns*, written for the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1976. The report is based on CoE's Fourteen Towns Project, probes the provision of cultural policy at a local authority or municipality rather than city or state level. As a sociological study of cultural life and cultural policy, using survey questionnaires on theatre, cultural activity, and library attendance as part of its findings, it enquires into the questions that need to be asked when formulating a political policy at a town level, while simultaneously confronting conceptual problems such as the use of recreational and leisure time, cultural needs, the allocation of funding, the beneficiaries of cultural policies and class and power implications of cultural policy. Taken together these two early publications demonstrate the breadth of interest and focus underpinning his subsequent *oeuvre* which fits within the two poles of sociological theory on the one hand and empirical policy focus on the other. The keen interest in policy and practical outcomes shows that it was no coincidence when Mennell ran as a politician in later years. Despite this, his work falls not in the tradition of critical theory but rather of secondary involvement within the context of a relative scientific detachment.

The civilizing of appetite

It was also his active interest in politics that delayed the writing up of one of his next major publications – *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. The Literary Review critically acclaimed the second edition of the book as a milestone in the field of culinary history, later translated into French, German, Dutch and Japanese. Yet as Mennell himself stresses, 'questions of sociological significance' are more important than 'a welter of fascinating … historical detail' (1996: x). In the book, Mennell debunks many food myths, often reproduced by hordes of food historians and anthropologists, including Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas, and remains committed to the process sociological approach, which has proven to be an ingenious tool for discovering many irregularities within the taken-for-granted ways of looking at various aspects of food cultures in general. Another interesting aspect of this study, which adds to its value and originality, is that it was written during the time when most sociologists saw the topic of food as too frivolous a subject for 'serious' sociological study.

Above all, Mennell refuses to look at eating habits in a static way. In other words, he emphasizes that we cannot make sense of present-day eating habits without studying longer-term developmental processes behind them including, for instance, how changes in the concept of appetite and in the philosophies around

food consumption are connected to a civilizing of the emotions. A thorough sociological and historical framework for understanding why pork is considered impure within Jewish culinary culture, or why the *offal* is still considered to be *awful* in the USA, but not France or Britain, are provided in this major work. One of the biggest bones of contention he has in *All Manners of Food* is with structuralists and anthropologists, given that they focus mainly on the aesthetics behind nutritional preferences. For him, none of the food avoidances or taboos is set in stone; rather we must take more adequate consideration of the social conditions for culinary patterns.

Curating Elias's legacy

Sometime in the middle of all this major output Stephen Mennell also managed to find time to publish probably the first – written while Elias was still alive – and arguably most authoritative books on Elias. His *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* (1989) has become one of the most comprehensive and insightful publications about Elias and his work, apart from those written by Elias himself. It provides thorough yet concise guidelines to understanding his work, including a response to some of the most common and unfounded criticisms concerning Eliasian ideas and arguments.

It did not come as a surprise then that, after establishing UCD Press in 1995 with his wife Barbara, Stephen Mennell, alongside some of the most esteemed colleagues and former students of Elias, took on a challenging task of editing the eighteen volumes of *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias* in English. These include fourteen volumes of books and a compilation of ninety essays, many of which were published for the first time. These and other kinds of time-consuming services such as his editorialship of *Figurations*, the newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation, which benefit the entire sociological community, often go unacknowledged yet they function as a crucial means for establishing a particular and inclusive kind of sociological paradigm.

Mennell on America

Elias's *The Civilizing Process* was a complex study of long-term trends in European society entailing an examination of the division of labour, urbanization, the growth of trade, the monopolization of the means of violence and how these were connected with changes in people's habitus - sometimes assessed in terms of self-constraints and foresight and thresholds of shame and repugnance. It also provided a conceptual revolution, breaking through static dualisms and dichotomies that have haunted sociology since its inception. These dichotomies have been especially prevalent in much of American sociology, situated within the most powerful state in the world today, whose ideology and cultural values have become steadily diffused throughout the world. Correspondingly, American sociology has either taken the static individual as its grounding concept or, via Parsons, the unflappable belief in the importance of norms and values.

In Mennell's next major study, *The American Civilizing Process*, he applied Elias's processual and relational concepts to analyze and explain 'why America is as it is' (Mennell, 2007: x). Consciously following Elias's framework in the *Civilising Process*, the book analyses, *inter alia*, popular usages of civilization, American we-images, the development of manners, state-formation, territorial expansion, and monopolization of the means of violence. The book is written from the standpoint of an outsider in a double sense: from Mennell's position as an academic writing outside of the USA and witnessing its global foreign policy impact, but who had also studied with Parsons and Homans, among others, and therefore had a keen insight into its intellectual tenor; and from an Eliasian point of view, whose work remained not only on the margins of

sociology generally, but has remained almost wholly absent from the American sociological scene. It is this informed-outsider perspective and an Eliasian processual, conceptual armory, that allows the book to provide startling new insights into the paradoxes characterizing contemporary North American social relationships but from a longer-term and processual point of view: between an agreeable day-to-day civility and capital punishment; from banning to allowing an unfettered possession of deadly weapons; between a spirit of classlessness to staggering levels of income and wealth inequality; as the foremost centre of scientific and technological development but with a level of religious adherence topping nearly all comparative survey charts in the developed world. It is also this unique standpoint that allows Mennell to reveal, in fine-tuned detail, the historical development of social character in America, based unusually not on one single model-setting elite, but several competing 'good societies'; and to interrogate the long-standing and over wrought question concerning 'American exceptionalism'. As the readers may have noticed, the range of expertise of Stephen Mennell is quite vast, which is also reflected in the very wide scope of the articles presented during the *Social Character, Historical Processes* Conference held in Dublin in January 2016. Since it would be quite impossible to publish them all here, we have out of necessity included a selection of nine papers that reflected this depth and breadth of sociological scope and ambition.

Outline of the issue

It was only right to begin with an article authored by someone who knows Stephen probably the longest (apart from his wife Barbara of course!), going as far back as 1975 and later being his doctoral thesis *Promotor* at the University of Amsterdam in 1985 - Johan Goudsblom. Goudsblom offers what he calls an intellectual genealogy of not only Norbert Elias's process of growing popularity among Dutch intellectuals, but also the circumstances behind the meeting of Mennell and Elias in mid 1970s.

The issue then moves towards a critical review, or rather a commendation, of Mennell's *The American Civilizing Process* by Florence Delmotte. Delmotte not only discusses the influence that Mennell had on her own career, but also draws a comparison of his main arguments with Elias's political writings. Delmotte also offers an insightful juxtaposition of reflections on contemporary European politics based on *The American Civilizing Process.*

In a similar vein, Wilterdink offers an account of the issues of wealth distribution in the United States and other Western societies. He questions American egalitarianism in the face of increasing social and economic inequality, and the curse of the 'American Dream'. He uses the power-interdependence model as a theoretical basis for explaining the increasing socio-economic inequality in the Western world.

In his paper, Andrew Linklater discusses how 'standards of civilisation' is an idea that played a specific role in the process of attempted monopolisation (or the so-called 'progress') by the Europeans over the rest of the social and political world. He uses process sociology to unravel the impact and scope that European societies have had over humanity as a whole, especially visible in the era of the global interconnectedness.

In the article 'On the idea of the nation', Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh offers some insightful and crucial notes towards understanding 'nation' within its definition. He questions the static character that the term 'nation' carries with it, together with its 'objective' criteria that are generally used for political purposes. In fact, he contends here that the more we strive towards such an 'objective' definition, the more it is likely to fall into the trap of some sort of ideology or self-delusion.

A similar topic is approached from a very different angle in Steven Loyal's paper on Elias's critiques of Pierre Bourdieu's work on the state. It is perhaps a long overdue comparison of the work of these two modern

theorists on this particular topic, especially in that some of their ideas and terminology tend to overlap. Nevertheless, as outlined in Loyal's paper here, the work of these two sociologists also tends to differ, not only through the contexts they examine but also within the very nature of the long-term analysis adopted by them.

Cas Wouters uses Elias's and Mennell's work in an attempt to illustrate the concepts and processes of functional (de)democratization. This is then followed by his discussion, from a long-term perspective, of processes of social differentiation and integration, in which he explores how functional democratisation and de-democratization could fit together as trends and concepts in a wider sociological framework.

In the penultimate article, based on the diaries of Dutch people who were forced to live through the horrors of Second World War, Brinkgreve and van Daalen offer an insightful account of the processes and coping mechanisms that were captured in diaries written during this difficult time. Within these written accounts, the authors manage to identify an array of often contrasting emotions that could not always have been envisaged by the survivors themselves at the time. The mixture of fear, anger, guilt, shame, jealousy and humiliation goes to show how difficult it is to fully grasp or judge the horrific events of World War Two within simplistic black and white terms.

And finally, in keeping with more recent world events, Marta Bucholc presents an account that responds to the current Polish constitutional crisis. This paper draws on the Eliasian perspective to analyse the events that took place in Poland after the parliamentary election of 2015, which have led for a right-wing orientated *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* party (Law and Justice) to secure a parliamentary majority. Bucholc draws especially on the established-outsiders framework in order to unravel the timing of these events, and also the use of 'symbolic operations' to justify institutional changes upon Polish democratic legal structures.

If one imagines this issue as a meal, readers will undoubtedly find it to be rich and piquant. One certainly gets the sense from the papers included here that Mennell is not a restricted or confined thinker. One also sees and senses the wider appreciation of his scholarly work to date and his continued support of peers, colleagues and younger generations of academics. When, in 1952, Elias wrote a response to a letter from a student at Leicester, it was indeed prescient when read in the context of Mennell's soci*able* character:

You see, in the course of one's life, if one thinks at all, one gets insight in a good many things which one never has the time to put down in writing, which one can only hand on by word of mouth to younger men and women understanding and able enough to take it up and to use it in their own way. That you allowed me to do a little of this handing on made me very happy. (7 June 1952).

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