

Guides on my way to Elias

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Lecture presented at ‘Social Character and Historical Processes: A Conference in Honour of Stephen Mennell’. Dublin, 7–8 January 2016.

Abstract: *This paper was originally presented as a speech in honour of Stephen Mennell. It consists of an attempt to reconstruct how, in the 1950s, the author as a student of social psychology at the University of Amsterdam, was made aware of, and became enthusiastic about, the work of Norbert Elias. Who were the people who served as links between himself and Elias? This ‘intellectual genealogy’ is followed by a brief discussion of how Stephen Mennell has become Elias’s most prominent advocate in the English speaking World.*

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This talk was originally announced as ‘The Myth of Historical Sociology’. I liked that title, but once I started writing, I did not really like the text. It was too programmatic and dry. And too predictable.

It boiled down to a rephrasing of Durkheim’s well-known statement on comparative sociology: ‘Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to *account* for the facts’ [italics added]. My thesis was (and is) that exactly the same can be said about ‘historical sociology’. The idea that there is a special branch of sociology called ‘historical’ presupposes the notion that sociology in general is a-historical – and that notion is a myth, a convenient myth for sociologists who prefer to attach their theories to a ‘frozen’ image of society as it ‘is’, instead of a more realistic dynamic model of human societies as involved in processes of biological and social evolution – and, eventually, of ‘Big History’, as expounded in David Christian’s great book *Maps of Time. An introduction to Big History* (2004).

Arguments supporting my thesis that all proper sociology is historical can be found all over Elias’s writings, from his essay on ‘The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present’ to his notes on ‘The Great Evolution’. But it is also the world we live in today that compels us almost irrefutably to recognise that our societies are changing, and that the ‘frozen image’ of a static social system is falling to pieces. I therefore gave up my original plan. For a moment I considered the possibility of talking about the connections between Big History and sociology, but I found that I have very little to add to my most recent publication on that topic, an article on ‘Fire and Fuel in Human History’, in Volume One of *The Cambridge World History*, Cambridge 2015.

Instead, I have chosen a more modest and simple subject, that had an additional advantage for me, since I had already given a lecture about it a few months ago, in Münster. Stephen was in the audience, but he confessed afterwards that he had not understood every word of my German with a Dutch accent. So I feel justified in more or less repeating my talk in a seasoned version after the Münster try-out. It is what the French call *petite histoire*, the very opposite of Big History. But, like everything that happens to have happened, it is inevitably embedded in the stream of Big History.

My Münster talk was organised as the the first in a series of lectures in commemoration of the fact that in the autumn of 1965 Norbert Elias had assumed a guest professorship in sociology at the University of Münster. Elias was then aged 68 – this was his first professorship anywhere in Europe.

2

I learned about Norbert Elias in the way intellectuals usually learn about each other – first I heard his *name* and I got an inkling of his reputation (which, at the time, was limited to a very few small circles of sociologists and other scholars, among whom his name circulated as a secret tip, a *Geheimtip*); soon after I knew the name, I started *reading* his published work (which consisted mainly of one book, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*); and a few years later I had the good fortune of *meeting* Elias himself, at the third conference of the International Sociological Association in Amsterdam in September 1956.

Fortunately, in *petite histoire* we can sometimes be very precise. My acquaintance with Norbert Elias began on Friday morning, 11 November 1951. As far as I know, nothing of world historical importance happened on that day. But in my own life a significant change occurred, although at the time I did not notice it. I was a nineteen-year-old student of social psychology at the university of Amsterdam, and I was with 150 other students attending a lecture in an introductory course by the Professor of sociology A.N.J. den Hollander. On that particular day Den Hollander talked about social change, and he pointed out that there were two different ways of explaining observed changes in human behaviour. One type of explanation was biological: the ultimate causes of change were thought to lie in the human *genotype*, as it was called in those days; today we might speak of the biogenetic structure. The sociological approach, Den Hollander continued, was to regard the genotype as constant, and to interpret changes in human behaviour as changes in the *phenotype*, brought about by changes in social structure. As an excellent example of the sociological approach Den Hollander mentioned the book *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* by Norbert Elias. This book demonstrated, according to Den Hollander, that sociologists are able to observe changes in human behaviour, such as the development of new and more ‘refined’ table manners, and to explain those innovations as reflecting changes in the overall social structure – notably, he might have added, shifts in power balances.

I noted down the title of Elias’s book, as I did with other titles that Den Hollander mentioned in his lectures. Many of those titles were German, and the books referred to had been published ‘before the war’, as we then used to say. (Today it would be most unlikely that a Dutch sociologist in a first year lecture course would recommend to his students a book of 800 pages in German. Back in 1951, I found this quite normal.)

Noting down the title of Elias’s book was a *necessary* condition for me for borrowing the book from the library and reading it. But I cannot be sure that it was a *sufficient* condition: many of the books my teachers recommended I never read.

3

Fortunately I received a second incentive to read *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. Soon after Den Hollander drew my attention to it, much to my surprise, I came across the same title in a very different context, in the Collected Works of Menno ter Braak.

In the 1930s Menno ter Braak was an influential (and controversial) Dutch writer and literary critic, someone whom today we might call a public intellectual. For me, in the early 1950s, he was my intellectual hero. I still have a portrait of him in my study.

After reading Ter Braak's – highly favourable – review of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, I decided that I should have a look at it myself. I borrowed the two volumes from the library, was immediately captured by the Foreword, and within a week I had reached the last page.

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So the recommendations of Den Hollander and Ter Braak raised my interest in Norbert Elias. At the time, I did not realise that these two men represented different 'chains of transmission' in the reception of Elias's work. I now see that in the Netherlands, from the very beginning, there have been at least two intellectual contexts in which his book was read, discussed, admired and criticised. Den Hollander represented the 'sociological' lineage, oriented primarily to the social sciences, Ter Braak represented a 'literary' and 'historical' lineage, oriented primarily to the humanities, to arts and letters. I myself was interested in both fields. (The fact that the book was not written as an overtly sociological treatise was one of the reasons why it appealed to me.)

Once I had read Elias's book I recommended it to my friends in the social sciences as well as the humanities. But it never occurred to me to ask the obvious question: what had prompted Den Hollander and Ter Braak to read and then to praise Elias's work?

With the aid of a few more flashbacks, I shall now turn to that question.

5

Den Hollander held a degree in social geography, but he had also taken courses in sociology with W.A. Bonger, whom he continued to hold in high esteem. In the 1920s and 1930s, Bonger was a prominent Dutch sociologist and criminologist. He was also politically active, as a loyal member of the Social Democratic Party, and a staunch opponent of Soviet Communism as well as Fascism and National Socialism. In May 1940, Hitler's army and air force invaded the Netherlands. When, after a few days of unequal warfare, the Dutch government capitulated, Bonger decided there was no future for him under a Nazi regime, and he committed suicide. Among his few posthumous publications was a highly positive review of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* in the official journal of the Dutch Sociological Association. Den Hollander must surely have read this review. But what had prompted Bonger to write it?

In the course of his career, Bonger made many international contacts, one of which was with the sociologist Karl Mannheim. Mannheim was then twice an exile. Born in Hungary, he took refuge from the fascist Horthy regime in 1919, and settled in Germany, in the Weimar Republic. He adopted German as his second first language, and in 1930, at the age of 36, he acquired the chair of sociology at the university of Frankfurt. His first assistant, whom he valued so highly that he once sent him to a conference as his stand-in, was Norbert Elias. In March 1933, Mannheim fled into exile once more, this time to England. From there he made several visits to the Netherlands, where Bonger was one of his contacts. It is very likely that in talking shop Mannheim mentioned the promising Norbert Elias and his ambitious research project on 'the process of civilisation'.

All in all, I think we can be reasonably sure about one plausible 'chain of transmission': from Elias via Karl Mannheim and W.A. Bonger to Den Hollander, and then from him to me – from one sociologist to another, an 'intra- or 'mono-disciplinary' trajectory.

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The second line, the 'literary line', leading from Elias to Ter Braak, is even shorter. As I said before, Menno ter Braak was a leading Dutch literary critic and polemicist. Like Bonger, he uncompromisingly opposed Fascism and National Socialism. And like Bonger again, his disgust of the Nazis was so great that after the Dutch capitulation on 14 May 1940, he committed suicide. Bonger and Ter Braak were among the few Dutch people not of Jewish descent who took their own lives on that fateful day.

Apart from this tragic ending, the two men had little in common. As public figures, they must have known of each other's existence, but I doubt if they ever met. Bonger had strong affiliations with the university of Amsterdam and with the Social Democratic party, Ter Braak's loyalties, on the other hand, were far more personal; he referred to himself as a 'politician without a party', who felt ill at ease in political meetings.

But Ter Braak took great interest in the *Exilliteratur* written by German authors who after March 1933 were no longer permitted to publish their work in Germany. In September 1933, a Dutch publishing house founded a monthly journal for German authors in exile. The journal was called *Die Sammlung* ('The Collection'); its sole editor was Klaus Mann, a son of Thomas Mann.

For the two years that *Die Sammlung* existed, Klaus Mann lived alternately in Amsterdam and Paris. From his extensive diaries we can learn that in both cities he had many contacts in the literary world with people whom he saw regularly in cafés and over meals. One of his Parisian acquaintances was Norbert Elias, who lived there until he left for London in 1935.

Klaus Mann managed to obtain Elias's permission to publish in *Die Sammlung* an essay about *Kitsch* – the concept and the phenomenon – which contained a very original but clearly unfinished outline of a sociological theory of modern culture (of 'modernity'). Within a week of its publication, Menno ter Braak wrote an appreciative commentary on this essay in the newspaper of which he was the literary editor. From then on, Ter Braak knew that Norbert Elias was an interesting writer.

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Let me skip a few years in the flashbacks, from the mid 1930s to 1939. Norbert Elias was now living in London, on a small income, a bit of which was supplied by a Dutch fund for supporting academics and other intellectuals in exile. His great book on the process of civilisation had finally been published, by an obscure firm in Basle, Switzerland. It was out of the question to get the book reviewed – or marketed and sold – anywhere in Germany or Austria. Some European countries with a literate elite able to read German were still unoccupied. But how could Elias find competent reviewers there?

He sent requests to some old friends who were also living in exile. Several of them were indeed willing to write a review, and the tenor of these reviews was generally very positive (although sometimes vestiges of old disputes and irritations still cropped up). On 29 May 1939 Elias sent a letter to Klaus Mann, asking him for council. I quote from a letter, now in the Norbert Elias archive in Marbach:

I have another small request. Perhaps you remember my essay on 'The kitsch style and the age of kitsch'. A Dutch newspaper then published an extensive and exceptionally understanding review by a well-known Dutch literary critic, which you kindly sent me. Do you happen to remember this man's name? I should like to send him a copy of my book for a review.

Klaus Mann replied on 21 June 1939 from New York:

I don't remember quite clearly any more which Dutch author has at the time written about your kitsch essay; but I do remember that you had an intelligent review in Holland. I think it was written by Dr. Menno ter Braak [...]. You should certainly have a copy dispatched to him – even if he was *not* the author of that review. He will be able to appreciate the charm and value of your research. He is an extraordinarily sensible and versatile character– although he can sometimes be obstinately excentric.

Those among you who have known Norbert Elias personally may find Klaus Mann's characterisation of Ter Braak also quite fitting for Elias himself. And, anyhow, we know that Ter Braak did receive a copy of the first volume of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, and wrote the very favourable review that gave me the definitive spur to read the entire book.

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With these words I might have concluded my talk. I think I have presented enough evidence to support my original idea that the men listed at the end of this text have created the necessary conditions for later developments that eventually resulted in my being here, and addressing you today.

There are two things, however, that bothered me about this list, and, consequently, about my speech. Originally, the list contained only six names – all of them of men. Nor did I mention any woman in my *talk*. Moreover, I also neglected completely what Marxists would call the material basis, in the form of money – which for the writers in exile was extremely important, since most of them had so very little of it.

Fortunately I was able to repair both omissions by adding one more name: Annemarie Schwarzenbach. (When I read the German version of this paper in Münster to an audience of about 150 German speaking people, I asked who had heard this name before. Only a very few hands were raised.)

Annemarie Schwarzenbach was indeed a woman, although she often dressed like a man; and it was she who financed *Die Sammlung* during the two years that the journal existed. She could afford to do so, as the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Switzerland. Her parents sympathised with the Nazis and entertained in their Zürich villa not only musical celebrities such as Toscanini and Bruno Walter, but also leading members of the NSDAP such as Hermann Goering and Joseph Goebbels. Annemarie herself, however, from her student days onward, moved in circles that were strongly opposed to National Socialism. She had an intimate and complicated relationship with Erika Mann, and also befriended Erika's brother Klaus. From the very start she supported *Die Sammlung*, and it was thanks to her that the authors received decent royalties.

She must have been a fascinating figure, strikingly beautiful and gifted with many talents. She received a doctorate with high honours at Zürich University, for a study of local history in the Engadin. She then chose the life as a creative writer, of both fiction and non-fiction. She made no secret of being a lesbian, but also had several affairs with men. She had a wide range of talents, both literary and musical, and an adventurous spirit with a penchant for 'living dangerously'.

Exceptionally for a woman of her generation, she was fond of driving, and travelled as a reporter all over the world, in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Restless and often profoundly unhappy, she became addicted to alcohol and drugs, and could be 'cured' only by hospitalisation. She survived two serious suicide attempts. In

1938 she started with a female friend on a journey by car that took her first to Kabul, where her friend left her because Annemarie had repeatedly broken her promise not to use any intoxicants on the way. Meanwhile the Second World War had broken out. All by herself she drove to Bombay and embarked upon the journey home. In the following years she visited and wrote reports from the US, Latin America and Africa. Back home in the Engadin a bicycle accident caused her death.

Annemarie Schwarzenbach died at an even younger age than Menno ter Braak. But like him, she deserves a place on the short list of people who played an integral part in creating the initial conditions for me to become interested in Norbert Elias. Without Annemarie Schwarzenbach the journal *Die Sammlung* would never have been founded, and I might not have been here today.

9

My ruminations about the 1930s and early forties were kindled by a casual remark I once made to Hermann Korte. Hermann, Stephen and I are the members of the Board of the Norbert Elias Foundation. I said to Hermann: ‘if it were not for Klaus Mann, you and I might never have met.’

My Münster talk was an elaboration of that remark, about the ‘prehistory’ of my getting to know Norbert Elias – what it was that made me curious to read his work and then to meet him.

But then, once I knew Norbert, through him and his work I met other people whom I might never have met otherwise. One of the first was Stephen Mennell. In retrospect, meeting him was also an important event in my life.

Stephen and I first met in the Christmas holiday season somewhere in the mid-seventies (about 40 years ago). The London publishing house Hutchinson had bought the rights for a series of introductory text books in sociology, published in the US by Prentice-Hall. Almost all those books were written in English, by American authors. But in the German edition of the series, the first volume was written in German, by a man named Norbert Elias. The publisher asked a professional translator to translate this book into English. Uncertain about some ‘technical’ passages, she asked for Stephen’s advice, and so Stephen became a co-translator of *What Is Sociology?*

The title of the book was simple and easy to translate. But the contents, which were to provide an answer to the question, were a different story. For quite a few terms used by Elias (or even coined and introduced by him) there was no readymade equivalent in English. And not only the vocabulary was tricky, so sometimes was the syntax.

Stephen sent a list of queries to Norbert, and he replied by inviting Stephen and his wife Barbara to come to Leicester for a few days in the Christmas holiday to discuss the problems. It was a reasonable plan that failed miserably. Instead of just answering Stephen’s queries, Norbert began rewriting whole sentences, and adding paragraphs with new ideas and nuances. The translation process thus came to an almost complete halt.

It so happened that my wife Maria and I were in England during the same Christmas holiday, and we visited Norbert. There we met Stephen and Barbara. Stephen and I got along well, and we decided to ask Norbert to delegate to me the task of helping Stephen to sort out the problems of translation. To our relief, Norbert agreed.

Stephen and I then started a correspondence, and the following summer Stephen came over to Amsterdam to discuss the final editing. The weather was very pleasant, we sat in the garden, drank lots of coffee and tea, and

eventually only one query remained unsolved: how to translate 'Zustandsreduktion'. We left the solution to Norbert, who decided upon 'process reduction' – a term that, taken literally, means the exact opposite.

I think those conversations in the garden were for me the definite confirmation of a thesis I had proposed a few years earlier, in a Dutch journal of sociology, to the effect that Elias's work represented a new paradigm in sociology. Unfortunately, the article in question appeared only in Dutch, in a Dutch journal. Among sociologists in the Netherlands, it created quite a stir, but it remained almost completely unnoticed beyond the borders.

It was not until 1978 that the English translation of *What Is Sociology?* appeared. By that time, Stephen and I had found new ways to co-operate. Stephen was extremely helpful in amending my writings in English, books as well as articles. The first in a long list was my contribution to *Human Figurations*, the *Festschrift* that was offered to Elias on his eightieth birthday, in 1977. The presentation took place in Aachen, at the first international meeting devoted to the work of Elias.

From then on, I could count on Stephen's help in what he liked to call 'Churchillising' my English. Soon after the Aachen conference, Stephen started writing a book on culinary traditions in England and France – comparative sociology in the true Durkheimian sense, and historical as well. We decided that the book could be submitted for a PhD at the University of Amsterdam, with me as the official supervisor, the 'promotor'.

The collaboration between Stephen and me reached a peak in 1998, when we edited two separate anthologies (or 'readers') intended to serve as introductions to Elias's sociology. One volume was published by the University of Chicago Press, and called *Norbert Elias on Civilization, Power, and Knowledge*. The other volume, published by Blackwell, was proudly called *The Norbert Elias Reader*. Both books together, published 101 years after Elias was born, were attempts to 'put him on the map' and, perhaps inevitably, to 'canonise' our interpretation of his work.

Among the many things I learned from Norbert Elias is the habit of looking at human affairs as processes. In most processes we can observe successive phases. Thus, in my own intellectual development I can distinguish four phases, of about equal length. The First Phase was one all of us here went through, the phase of pure *ignorance*, when we had never heard of Norbert Elias. Then, in my case, came Phase Two, *apprenticeship*, when I learned more about Elias's work, and gradually gained a better understanding of its full impact. Then, in the Third Phase, I became involved in *propaganda and polemics*, among sociologists as well as in other fields. Finally, in Phase Four, I left the arena of advocacy and controversy, and concentrated on studies of what I like to refer to as 'the expansion of the anthroposphere within the biosphere' – a big theme that I try to keep manageable by approaching it with the conceptual tools of process sociology.

I was able to give up my role as a propagandist and polemicist because I knew that others were speaking up for what Jason Hughes called our 'habits of good sociology'. The unofficial leader among the English speaking members of this troop was and is Stephen. As you all know, in the meantime he also succeeded in completing the momentous task as editor in chief of the English edition of Elias's *Collected Works*.

An English politician called his autobiography *Old Men Forget*. I continue to cherish many good memories of times spent with Stephen and with Stephen and Barbara. I have to leave these memories out now, not because I have forgotten, but because my time is up.

Acknowledgement

The quotations from the correspondence between Norbert Elias and Klaus Mann are based on the original text in German that was kindly made available to me by the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach.

The cast, in order of appearance:

Norbert Elias (1897–1990)

A.N.J. den Hollander (1906–1976)

Menno ter Braak (1902–1940)

W.A. Bongers (1876–1940)

Karl Mannheim (1893–1947)

Klaus Mann (1906–1949)

Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908–1942)

Stephen Mennell (*1944)

Biography

Johan Goudsblom, a Dutch sociologist, first read Norbert Elias's book on the process of civilisation in German in 1952. He met Elias in person at a conference in 1956. Over the years, he has been actively propagating Elias's work. Most of his own work is in Dutch. His publications in English include *Dutch Society* (1967), *Sociology in the Balance* (1977), *Nihilism and Culture* (1980), *Fire and Civilization* (1992) and (with Bert de Vries) *MappaeMund: Humans and their Habitats in a Long-term Socio-ecological Perspective* (2002). While in his earliest work the biological theory of evolution is rarely mentioned, over the years it has come increasingly to the fore as an integral part of his sociological perspective on human history and human ecology.

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