

# *Apologia pro vita sociologica sua*: social character and historical process, and why I became an Eliasian sociologist

*Stephen Mennell*

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2017

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0006.102> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0006.102>]

 [<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>]

In 1854, John Henry Newman, subsequently Cardinal Newman, founded the Catholic University of Ireland in this very building. [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#) University College Dublin (UCD) traces its origins back to Newman's university.

Newman had originally been a clergyman in the Church of England, and a prominent academic in Oxford. Victorian England, in which theological questions still mattered, had been transfixed by Newman's gradual movement towards the Roman Catholic Church, into which he was finally received in 1845 – a move that the Protestant establishment regarded as eccentric at best, scandalous at worst. Some years later, he responded to an attack on his views by the Anglican Charles Kingsley, in what became Newman's famous book *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864). It made Newman probably the foremost exponent of Catholicism in the English-speaking world.

Meeting as we are today in Newman House, it seems appropriate to offer some reflections on how my own career was shaped by my encounter with Norbert Elias and his brand of sociology; my 'conversion' may not have been regarded quite as scandalous by the British sociological establishment, but it was certainly considered eccentric.

Let me break down my career into phases – a 'phaseology' of the type that Joop Goudsblom (1996) advocates – and try to explain why the connection between 'social character' and 'historical process' has been a *Leitmotiv* in my thinking.

## 1. Before Cambridge: schooldays in Bradford and Huddersfield

I was born in Huddersfield, Yorkshire, in 1944, and grew up in working-class communities in Huddersfield and Bradford. [\[2\]\[#N2\]](#) In my teenage years, I read Richard Hoggart's classic book *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). His description of growing up before the war in the Hunslet area of Leeds was so much like my own experience in post-war Manningham in neighbouring Bradford that it read to me like autobiography. (Mind you, I seem to have been sheltered from the salty sexual sayings that Hoggart records.) Equally feeling like autobiography was Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* (1962), which was based on interviews with upwardly mobile 'scholarship boys' who were alumni of the very school in Huddersfield to which I moved when I was 16. I could actually identify some of their respondents, even though they were supposed to be anonymised. These two books also chimed with the affinity I already felt to the anti-commercial cultural critique of capitalism stemming in particular from William Morris. [\[3\]\[#N3\]](#) That continuing anti-commercial feeling, of course, puts me at odds with the entire modern Western world. But,

more to the point today, I can see in my teenage years the beginnings of my interest in the theme of this conference: the connection between ‘social character and historical process’.

Mind you, it was not predestined that I become a sociologist. My passions at school were history and geography. I would probably have read history at university, were it not that I ended up not having ‘O’-level Latin, which in those remote days of half a century ago was a prerequisite for all history courses in every British university except Hull – and I didn’t want to go to Hull. (‘From Hell, Hull and Halifax, Good Lord preserve us.’ [4].[#N4]) Why I did not have Latin is a nice little application of C. Wright Mills’s dictum that the sociological task involves the ability ‘to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society’ (1959: 6). In 1957, when I was 13, the USSR launched the first Sputnik, triggering the ‘space race’, and then all little boys of my age were urged to become rocket engineers and nuclear physicists – so I opted for the science stream, not realising that it involved dropping Latin. Later, I switched back to Arts subjects, but by then it was too late. But in 1963 it became possible for me to matriculate at Cambridge with my two modern languages, French and German. So I ended up reading the Economics Tripos, in which sociology was then what would now be called a ‘minor’.

## 2. Cambridge

I have never regretted acquiring a basic knowledge of economics, if only on the principle of ‘Know thine enemy’, but I soon gravitated towards sociology. It was taught at the time by John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Philip Abrams, and Earl Hopper.

From Goldthorpe in particular I came to appreciate how to use *theory* – in the strict sense. That is, by ‘theory’ I have always understood a system of general propositions and initial observations from which it was possible to deduce further implications capable of empirical–theoretical testing through observation – the process through which the stock of reliable knowledge grows. I always admired the rigorous way in which John deduced empirically testable hypotheses from what were originally little more than speculative hunches. For example, *The Affluent Worker* (Goldthorpe et al., 1968–9), the outcome of ‘the Luton Study’ that was in full swing when I was a student, was a response to the suggestion that economic affluence would inevitably make working-class people shift politically to the right (Zweig, 1960; Abrams and Rose, 1960). I’m not sure whether all of the conclusions John has drawn from his empirical research have withstood the test of time, but I still admire the research and the reasoning. I suppose that, for a decade or more, under John’s influence I was a Popperian.

It is therefore a pity that John Goldthorpe came to disapprove so emphatically of the specific body of theory I sought to treat in this way, trying to extend and test interesting insights derived from it: I refer of course to that of Norbert Elias. In particular, John came to be dismissive of the sociological use of historical evidence, becoming a champion of what Elias called ‘the retreat of sociologists into the present’ (Elias, 2009a), and even to play footsie with rational choice theory (Goldthorpe, 2000) – of which more later. [5].[#N5]

## 3. Harvard

In 1966, I went to Harvard on a Frank Knox Fellowship, because that was where all the sociological theory then seemed to come from. It is hard for younger sociologists to imagine how dominant Talcott Parsons was at the time. Even David Lockwood, who is now remembered as an early opponent of Parsonian theory, organised his lectures essentially in terms of Parsons’s categories. [6].[#N6] About 20 years earlier, Parsons had

played a leading part in the creation of Harvard's interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations, which brought together social anthropology, sociology, social psychology and clinical psychology. The connections between sociology, anthropology, psychology and history still seem to me to be the central intellectual problem of the social sciences – the problem of the connection between 'social character' and 'historical processes'. And if the star-studded Department of Social Relations could not crack it, it seemed that no one could. Among the others whose lectures I attended were: Robert Bellah, George Homans, Seymour Martin Lipset, David Riesman, Kenneth Gergen, Roger Brown, David Maybury-Lewis, Stanley Milgram, Paul Hollander and Gino Germani.

I chatted to Parsons quite a lot, and became the recognised expert on his ideas among the first-year graduate students; but, after close study, I also decided he had gone bonkers. This was confirmed when I witnessed him invent a fourth component for the Holy Trinity, in order to make it fit neatly into his AGIL system of fourfold 'functional exigencies'. His goal seemed to be a kind of crazy conceptual filing cabinet. [7].[#N7]. Taxonomy of course plays some part in the growth of scientific knowledge, as the name of Linnaeus reminds us. The problem was that I found it simply impossible to deduce from Parsons's intellectual Heath Robinson contraption any questions that might prove interesting as a subject for PhD research. Only later, under the tutelage of Elias, did I come to understand why that was so: that Parsons had taken the wrong turn from the beginning. In his essay in intellectual autobiography (1970), Parsons acknowledges that his reading of Kant as an undergraduate at Amherst was his crucial point of departure. But only later did I grasp that Parsons was indulging in a grand exercise in what Elias called *Zustandsreduktion* or 'process-reduction'. Theory must have moving parts.

Fortunately, I was able to resist drawing the conclusion that, in being unable to make use of the ideas of the world's greatest sociological theorist, I was uniquely stupid. There were many sceptical voices. I took a reading course on the philosophy of science with George Homans, who told me (and no doubt many others) that 'the trouble with Talcott is that he's a great empirical sociologist, but he's no good at theory!' I also learnt a lot from Hermínio Martins, who introduced us to a less hard-line positivistic view of the philosophy of social science. I shall always treasure Hermínio's opening words in his seminars on 'The nature of theory, prediction and explanation in the social sciences':

A cursory reading of the philosophy of science may lead one to the premature conclusion that sociology is a series of abortions. But, like sexual intercourse, you are in the end bound to get it.

[8].[#N8]

The strong conclusion was that one need not as a sociologist succumb to 'physics envy' and have wish-dreams of wearing a white laboratory coat, but, on the other hand, theories did have to make possible deductive inferences capable of empirical test. They had to make possible *predictions*, and if the predictions were borne out by empirical evidence, the logical structure that produced the prediction also offered an *explanation*. From Hermínio, I first learned a point that proved significant in my future research: that prediction includes not only '*prediction*' about the chronological future, but also *retrodiction* – that is, predictions about what one may be likely to unearth about the *past*.

It was also from Hermínio that I first heard the distinction between 'the Hobbesian problem of order', which Parsons claimed to be solving, and 'the Cartesian problem of order'. As it turned out, Descartes and not Hobbes proved to be the central figure for most of 'social theory' in the ensuing half century.

I spent my time at Harvard in the company of the first-year PhD students. [9].[#N9]. One major theme ran right through the year's graduate seminar: the so-called 'macro/micro' problem. This is more or less the same as

the ‘individual and society’ problem, or the ‘agency and structure’ problem.

Apart from Parsons’s efforts to tackle this problem (or congeries of problems), we spent a lot of time discussing Peter Blau’s then new book *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964). ‘Exchange theory’ had really been initiated by George Homans’s book *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms* (1961), which, in reviving the utilitarian strand in sociological theory and seeking to adapt insights from economics, effectively marked the beginnings of today’s ‘rational choice theory’. Blau’s book so impressed one of my postgraduate friends, Siegwart Lindenbergh, that for the remainder of his career he has been a leading champion of rational choice theory. At that time, however, I knew a lot more economics than Siggy did, and I was not convinced. Blau really only went beyond Homans in using the economists’ paraphernalia of indifference curves, Edgeworth boxes and Pareto optima, which lent his ideas a false aura of precision. Rational choice theory may be useful in analysing some specific short-term problems, but fundamentally its central assumption remains the same as Lord Macaulay identified in his review (1829) of James Mill’s utilitarian *Essay on Government*: the proposition that ‘a man had rather do what a man had rather do’. The sociological task is to explain *how and why* it comes about that ‘a man had rather do’ *what* he had rather do – in other words, how social character is shaped through historical processes.

Moreover, Blau’s claim to have bridged the macro/micro gap proved on close examination to rest merely on borrowing Parsons’s *Leitmotiv* of ‘shared values’. Many years later, to mark Elias’s centenary in 1997, Joop Goudsblom and I organised a session on Elias at the American Sociological Association annual conference in Toronto. The overall theme chosen for the conference by Neil Smelser, who was the President of the ASA at the time, was ‘the macro/micro problem’, and it served to demonstrate that American sociology was no nearer solving this problem (or non-problem) than it had been 30 years earlier.

## 4. Accidental encounter with Elias

From Harvard, I went directly to the University of Exeter, to become an (extremely young) Assistant Lecturer. In my early lectures on sociological theory, I was still grappling with the macro/micro problem. Then there appeared an article by Alan Dawe (1970), in which he argued not only that there *were* two separate sociologies, but that they could *never* be integrated and reconciled with each other. This infuriated me. Dawe’s view that the micro and the macro could never be synthesised seemed to me a symptom of, and a recipe for, intellectual laziness. My first book (1974) was, on one level, a quiet polemic against Dawe. Not that I knew exactly how to achieve the synthesis. But I thought the way forward must lie in the general area of Georg Simmel’s (1950 [1908]) discussion of ‘the significance of numbers for social life’, written as far back as 1908.

It was at this point that a seminal accident brought me into contact with Norbert Elias. I have told the story more fully elsewhere (2006), but the gist of it is that I was asked to assist Grace Morrissey, the wife of an Exeter colleague, in translating a new book entitled *Was ist Soziologie?* The rest, so to speak, is history. At first, I couldn’t make out what Elias was on about. The first chapter, ‘Sociology: the questions framed by Comte’, gave an evaluation of Auguste Comte quite at odds with what I had heard from John Goldthorpe (and even from Robert Bellah). But the penny dropped when we came to translate chapter 3, the ‘Game Models’. Most people probably come to admire Elias through *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012 [1939]), but at the time of which I am speaking, that book had not been translated into English, nor indeed into French, the language in which I first read it. No, it was *What is Sociology?* that brought about *my* Damascene conversion.

That brilliant third chapter does many things. It shows how much more fundamental is the concept of interdependence than that of *interaction*. In my experience, most American sociologists are unable to

distinguish between the two. They have tended to remain firmly stuck at the level of face-to-face interaction, failing to deal with the ubiquitous social reality of interdependence. [10],[#N10]. In every human relationship of interdependence, there is ineluctably a power ratio or balance of power. Not an *equal* balance of power, as implied in the Parsons-Shils (1951) model of mutually supportive dyadic interaction, and in most interactionist models, but an unequal and often fluctuating balance of strength, depending on which side is most dependent on the other for their needs – needs that may be material, emotional or cognitive. As he increases the number of players in his game models, and as power ratios become relatively more equal, Elias shows how the course of the game becomes a process less and less in accordance with the plans and intentions of any of the players. In other words, numbers and power ratios are linked to unintended consequences or unplanned, ‘blind’ processes (see Mennell, 1977).

Here are some of the insights that the game models connect with each other:

- That power is always *relative*, always a ratio, and is a ubiquitous aspect of *every* link in the chains of human interdependences, at every level from face-to-face encounters all the way to international relations and global power.
- That the more complex and extensive the webs of interdependence, and the more relatively evenly balanced the power ratios within them, the more the interweaving of numerous people’s plans and intentions gives rise to consequences that no one has planned or intended:

‘From plans arising, yet unplanned

By purpose moved, yet purposeless’ (Elias, 2010: 62).

- That, in consequence, what Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh (1977) has called ‘the attribution of blame as a means of orientation’ so frequently employed in the social sciences (and almost always in politics) is rarely appropriate.
- That, in further consequence, the ‘methodological atomism’ implicit in much sociological vocabulary and in research techniques such as opinion surveys is best avoided (a point Elias shares with the Frankfurt School).
- That, since human interweaving produces opaque networks and unforeseen outcomes, systems of belief, ideologies and emotional commitments are developed to make sense of what people partially perceive. This points onward to Elias’s comprehensive *sociological* theory of knowledge and the sciences – the basis of that Richard Kilminster has called a ‘post-philosophical sociology’ – a theory that I consider at least as important as Elias’s better known theory of civilising processes.

All this is to be found encapsulated in the game models. Yet one reviewer spoke of the ‘tired old analogy between social interaction and games’, as if Elias had not gone miles further than Erving Goffman.

When I eventually met Elias in person, I felt within minutes that here I was dealing with a vastly more powerful sociological mind than Talcott Parsons. Yet at the time, he was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world beyond the circle of those who knew him personally. That is not surprising, because his *magnum opus*, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had not yet (largely through his own fault) been published in English, and it was before most of the huge flood of publications that eventually filled the 18 volumes of the Collected Works. *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had been published obscurely in German only two years after Parsons’s hugely influential *The Structure of Social Action*. [11],[#N11]. Eric Dunning once indulged in a bit of counter-historical speculation: how differently would sociology have developed if *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* had been translated immediately and if, crucially, Talcott Parsons had been at the University of



Leicester and Elias had been at Harvard? For established–outsiders relationships are just as pervasive in academia as they are in social life generally (see Elias, 2009b).

Through Elias, I met Eric Dunning and Richard Kilminster. In the early days, it often felt as though we were a minority of three *contra omnes* within British sociology. But soon I encountered many others. At Elias's house in Leicester at New Year 1975, Barbara and I first met Joop and Maria Goudsblom. We soon became close friends, and I have often said that I learnt more about the 'figurational' or 'process sociological' way of thinking from Joop than I did directly from Elias. My intellectual debts to Joop are too numerous for me to be able to list them here. In 1977 Joop, with Hermann Korte and Peter Gleichmann, edited a Festschrift (1977) for Elias on his eightieth birthday, presented at a conference in Aachen. At the beginning of January 1980, Eric and I followed this up by organising an astonishingly well-attended conference at Balliol College, Oxford, the first in the Anglophone world devoted specifically to Elias's work. Through these and many subsequent gatherings, there took shape a large-scale worldwide network of social scientists, which has continued to grow in the quarter-century since Elias's death (see Górnicka et al., 2015).

The consequence of my encounter with Elias early in my career was that, unlike almost everyone else, I read all the subsequent fads and fashions in sociological theory through the lens of Elias – symbolic interactionism, the Heinz 57 varieties of phenomenology, the Frankfurt School, structuralism, post-structuralism, Foucault, Bourdieu, Bauman – and generally found them wanting. Of course, I found useful ideas in all or most of them, but none of them offered so comprehensive a *theoretical–empirical* synthesis as did Elias. They didn't make so many *connections* between so many things. In particular, they did not offer much in the way of a theory of knowledge, because they generally outsourced their epistemology to the philosophers.

I particularly deprecate the tendency of 'social theory' to be seen as an inconsequential series of sets of concepts, each of which becomes briefly fashionable and which one takes up and then throws away. [12][#N12] It is as if the pursuit of understanding human society is like looking through a kaleidoscope. If the gaudy-coloured concepts do not seem to make everything clear, give the conceptual kaleidoscope another shake and hope that this time the system of mirrors will produce an intelligible pattern. I remember a young Exeter colleague who said he thought that Jean Baudrillard had finally cracked all the problems of sociology. Who now even remembers Baudrillard?

I have a particular dislike of ornamental sociology. [13][#N13] By that I mean the invocation of various concepts from a variety of sources, often in a separate 'theory section' of a book or thesis, which then prove to have no bearing on the empirical research that follows: there is no hint of any deduction from axioms. It rather reminds me of the ornamental style of cookery that began with Jules Gouffé in the mid nineteenth century and lingered into the 1950s: pieces of meat were encased in aspic, in which were embedded slices of black truffle or other delicacies. Prince Philip once complained about always being served food 'with bits on'. The sociological equivalent is a pick-and-mix selection of conceptual slivers of Foucault, Bourdieu, Habermas, Bauman or various fashionable philosophers. But fundamentally, the ornamentation is unconnected with the sustenance underneath.

## 5. Food

This brings me on to food, and to my book *All Manners of Food*, which at Joop Goudsblom's invitation also became my Amsterdam doctoral thesis. When I started writing about food, most British sociologists regarded it as wildly eccentric of me. The same happened a bit earlier when Eric Dunning started writing about the

sociology of rugby and soccer. The general view was that ‘*Real men do social stratification*’. (And one prominent British sociologist queried whether my research was sociology at all.)

I set out to *use* Elias’s ideas. To start with, I had little more than a hunch that it might be possible to do something with old cookery books resembling what Elias had done with old manners books. Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh was immediately enthusiastic about the idea. Given the crudity of my hunch, though, Elias himself was initially not especially encouraging – but he nonetheless gave me some useful pointers. As I read myself into the subject, my hunch was steadily refined. *On the Process of Civilisation* led me to look for evidence of a process of the ‘civilising of appetite’, while *The Court Society* alerted me to the role of the absolutist courts – especially in France – in the emergence of *haute cuisine*. It also became clear that cuisine, or culinary cultures, reflected hanging power ratios between social strata. That was especially true of the different trajectories of England and France in both their politics and their cuisine.

So my research on food history proved to be a successful example of retrodiction: inference from some general sociological insights leading one to look for evidence, historical evidence in this case. This is how the ramifications of the theory of civilising processes have been worked out and its scope extended to an astonishing range of topics. Elias himself wrote on, among other things: violence; war; sport; ageing and dying; time; work; art; music; poetry; utopias; the sciences; and the relations between the sexes. Subsequently, others have extended his thinking into many other fields, and beyond Europe. The latest books to arrive are *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia*, by three scholars at the Australian National University (Broadhurst et al., 2015), an edited collection applying established–outsiders theory to the Palestinians (Rosenthal, 2015), and Marta Bucholc’s *A Global Community of Self-Defense* (2015). Elias’s thinking has been taken up in history (especially by world historians, social historians and art historians), cultural studies, criminology, anthropology, archaeology, psychology, political science and International Relations.

All this is very much at odds with the compartmentalisation of specialisms in conventional sociology. A few years ago, when Robert van Krieken tried to persuade the International Sociological Association to allow us to establish a Figural Sociology section within it, ISA officials responded ‘Yes, but *what* do you study?’ When Robert replied, ‘Everything’, they shut the door.

## 6. Advocating Elias

In 1986–88 I spent two consecutive years on sabbatical, first at Oxford and then at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study at Wassenaar. My major project was writing a book explaining Elias’s work as whole (Mennell, 1989). Elias didn’t like me writing it. He said. ‘While I am alive, Stephen, I am the best person to explain my ideas’. I quietly disagreed, but didn’t dare say so. When the book was published, however, he was persuaded that ‘Perhaps it will do some good’. The last time I saw him, a week before setting off to a professorship in Australia, he gave me a copy of his new book, *Studien über die Deutschen*, inscribed ‘For Stephen, *dass er Europa nicht vergesse*’. [14][#N14] I didn’t forget: three and half years later I was back in Europe, here in UCD.

I thought at first that I was the first to import Elias into Ireland. But no, that honour belongs to Tom Inglis, who already had a chapter entitled ‘The Irish civilising process’ in his classic book *Moral Monopoly* (1987). Steve Loyal learned his Elias later, in the long watches of the night, drinking with Eric Dunning.

Soon after I returned to Europe, Joop Goudsblom and Hermann Korte asked me to edit a newsletter, *Figurations*, for the Norbert Elias Stichting. The first issue was produced for the ISA World Congress of

Sociology in Bielefeld in 1994, and it has come out twice a year ever since, with the help successively of Aoife Rickard Diamond, Katie Liston and Barbara Górnicka (all of them having been PhD students in UCD).

Steven Pinker, in his best-selling study of the long-term decline of violence in human society, asserted that ‘Norbert Elias is the most important thinker you have never heard of’ (2011: 59n). Having spent a good deal of the last 40 years seeking to promote interest in Elias’s work and convince social scientists of its importance, I found that remark mildly discouraging. In fact, his ideas have attracted researchers in every continent, but they are still a minority taste, and Elias’s thinking seems to appeal especially to people working in the interstices between conventional disciplines rather than in their central territories. And, above all, recognition in the United States has been very slow in coming. In a witty email to Chris Rojek a few years ago, Alan Sica summarised why:

The reason Americans don’t take to Elias is that he writes about European historical and cultural change and American sociologists don’t feel comfortable with that sort of thing, except for [Jack] Goldstone and that small lot; and because he is theoretically very adventurous and synthetic, and they don’t go for that; and because he trashed Parsons, who many of them liked back in the day; and because he could be mistaken for a closet Freudian, which they don’t like; and because he brings up really obnoxious qualities of humankind, which they particularly don’t like; and because he wrote a helluva lot of stuff, which takes a long time to read, they don’t have time; and because ‘figuration’ is a word that has a distinctly effete connotations in this country, and sounds like art history ... (quoted in Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 44).

The sheer volume of Elias’s writings is certainly a problem. They present a comprehensive synthesis equal in ambition to Parsons’s, but on more secure *theoretical–empirical* foundations; you have to read the empirical evidence – the theory cannot be summarised in a few basic concepts.

Yet I think there is a deeper reason for Americans being relatively unreceptive to Elias: American individualism. I was struck by a recent comment by the writer Hari Kunzru in the *Guardian*. Now based in the USA, Kunzru (2015) remarked that ‘Americans are culturally averse to any explanation not based on the feelings and doings of the sovereign individual.’ <sup>[15].[#N15]</sup> And I think this cultural trait can be seen in American sociology too; few American sociologists seem able to escape the trap of the individual/society, agency/structure and macro/micro dichotomies. Richard Kilminster and I are planning to write an article on ‘*Homo clausus* as a total ideology’, looking at how, in Mannheim’s sense of ‘total ideology’, individualism (including in its latest manifestation, neo-liberal economics) permeates American society and sociology – and, in consequence, much of the rest of the world. It makes more *sociological* insights unthinkable. Extreme examples include the view common in the USA that the constant instances of gun violence are to be explained by individual psychology rather than the prevalence of gun ownership, or the insistence that terrorism is the work of ‘bad people’ unrelated to the outcomes of American foreign policy and militarism.

## 7. Politics

One aspect of my intellectual life has not been mentioned thus far – politics. I have taken a keen interest in politics since I started reading the *Daily Herald* at the age of six. I have been a city councillor, and in the middle of writing *All Manners of Food* I stood for parliament – unsuccessfully, thank goodness. Elias did not approve: ‘Stephen, your work is more important’ – but he added that, if I were elected, he looked forward to coming to tea on the terrace of House of Commons. I wasn’t, and he didn’t.



Figurational sociologists are not much known for policy-related research or political interventions. Part of Elias's theory of knowledge and the sciences is his discussion of the problems of involvement and detachment (2007), and Eliasians have a reputation for striving for relative detachment. Actually, it doesn't have very much to do with conscious individual striving. Elias's point is that a relatively high degree of safety and security in everyday life is necessary for the decline of 'magical–mythical thinking' and for people to become emotionally capable of making the 'detour via detachment' necessary for the 'relatively detached' pursuit of scientific knowledge. He deplored the low level of detachment that pervaded sociology in many countries, including in Britain, where the British Sociological Association often resembled the research department of the Labour Party. This is probably one reason for the almost total failure of sociology to penetrate the thinking of the public at large, [16],[#N16] who still tend to think in psychologistic terms, seeking explanations for social events in individual motivations. Another reason is that 'social theory' has long since disappeared up its own fundament. Sociology's failure in the public realm is especially noticeable in Ireland, where, for comment on current events, the media are less likely to call on sociologists than on historians, philosophers or even literary critics. [17],[#N17]

Yet, for all that they are seen as broadly apolitical, figurational sociologists seem to occupy a specific area of the political spectrum. I can't be sure that they are unanimous, but their views seem to congregate in the European social democrat part of the spectrum. I suspect the reason for this is their understanding of interdependence and its connection with balances of power, and how these are connected in turn with people's emotions and their perceptions of the world. Though most of them seem to eschew public controversy, I increasingly believe that is a pity, because they have insights to contribute to public discourse.

Moreover, it is a mistake to think that Elias disapproved of all forms of involvement. Yes, one had to make the 'detour via detachment', but then he envisaged the possibility of 'secondary involvement' (Elias, 2007: 59, 66, 71; see also Kilminster, 2004) – or, better, 'secondary *re*-involvement' as Steve Quilley has called it in conversation. In recent years, many younger figurationalists have applied Elias to policy-related research – but always with a long-term, historical and processual perspective. On a larger canvass, Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh and now Andrew Linklater (2011) have shown the relevance of Elias to international relations. I myself have indulged in a bit of secondary *re*-involvement. I would mention my recent essay 'Explaining American hypocrisy' (Mennell, 2015), in which I apply established–outsiders theory to American meddling in Ukraine. Since finishing my book *The American Civilizing Process* (2007), I have paid more attention to American foreign policy and militarism, notably in the Middle East. The failure of American interventions and the consequent destabilisation of the entire Middle East seem to me to stem from a failure to understand a basic point of Elias – that day-to-day safety comes before pretty well everything else, and high levels of fear and danger in everyday life have profound *decivilising* effects on people's habitus. [18],[#N18] The denizens of Foggy Bottom need to read, learn and above all inwardly digest *On the Process of Civilisation!*

## Conclusion

Let me end by looking back on my career. Do I have any regrets? Yes, there are too many projects that I have not finished. (In that, I am once more following Norbert Elias's model.) Worse still, there were good ideas that I never even began to pursue. Years ago, I thought of writing a book with the title *The Spirit of Accountancy, and How it Bugged Up Britain*. Or there was the article that Bryan Turner and I intended to write, called 'On the inadequacy of garbage disposal procedures in sociology'. More seriously, I wish it had not been quite such an uphill struggle to get a hearing for Elias's ideas; the resistance we encountered helped to make us look too much like a sect whose members, to use John Lever's phrase, had 'taken the blood oath'. But that has also

meant that I made so many close and life-long friends in many countries, who have supported each other through thick and thin. One of the most remarkable features of what Jason Hughes labelled ‘the figurati’ is that the research network they formed has been held together by commensality, also known as drinking together, over four decades. Even more remarkable, as Ademir Gebara has pointed out, is that we have not had the splits and schisms that have often afflicted other social-scientific traditions.

I want to thank everyone who has taken the time, trouble and expense to come to this conference: I am deeply honoured. I am especially grateful to Tom Inglis, Steve Loyal and the UCD School of Sociology for taking this initiative. And to Katie Liston. And to Barbara Górnicka, the brand-new Doctor who has done so much to make the conference happen, even while submitting her PhD thesis and coming through her viva!

## Notes

1. This paper was delivered at a conference on ‘Social Character and Historical Processes’, in honour of Stephen Mennell, Newman House, St Stephen’s Green, Dublin, 7–8 January 2016. [♣\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. My father, Arthur Mennell (1910–1994), was a white-collar railwayman – variously stationmaster, controller and eventually Assistant Area Manager in the West Riding of Yorkshire. In the standard occupational classifications used in conventional sociology he – and consequently I – would therefore be categorised as lower middle-class. But he and my mother, Violet Mennell (1910–1990) were very much of true working-class origin, and we always lived in working-class areas in Huddersfield and Bradford. [♣\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
3. See Anthony Crosland’s discussion of socialist doctrines that helped to shape the British Labour Party, in *The Future of Socialism* (1956), especially pp. 83–4. [♣\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
4. These words have been attributed to the so-called ‘Thieves’ Litany’, uttered in medieval Yorkshire. Their modern fame seems to date from 1941, when Lord Halifax used them when naming the first Halifax bomber. [♣\[#N4-ptri\]](#)
5. See also the response by Michael Mann (1994) to Goldthorpe’s essay, and from a more explicitly Eliasian standpoint, Eric Dunning’s (1977) critique of Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism* in response to Goldthorpe’s advocacy of Popper. [♣\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
6. See my undergraduate lecture notes, now in the archive of the Marshall Library, Cambridge. [♣\[#N6-ptri\]](#)
7. Ian Craib (1984) reached the same conclusion about Parsons’s goal being to create a conceptual filing cabinet. [♣\[#N7-ptri\]](#)
8. Faithfully recorded in my own lecture notes, consulted in December 2015. [♣\[#N8-ptri\]](#)
9. As a Frank Knox Memorial Fellow, I was technically not one of them, although I could have opted into PhD registration. [♣\[#N9-ptri\]](#)
10. For further remarks on this point, especially with reference to the (generally very impressive) work of Randall Collins, see Cas Wouters and Stephen Mennell (2015). Sociologists who remain essentially at the interactional level fail to solve the so-called ‘macro–micro problem’ in sociological theory, to which in our view Elias’s is by far the most sophisticated solution offered to date. This seems to me to be true even of Collins’s own most ambitious attempt, in *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004). [♣\[#N10-ptri\]](#)
11. Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1937). [♣\[#N11-ptri\]](#)
12. From a conference in the Netherlands in the late 1980s, I remember Peter Abell’s comment on Anthony Giddens, who then seemed a sociological colossus: ‘There is no theory of structuration – it merely re-describes the problem using different words’. [♣\[#N12-ptri\]](#)

13. I take the term from Roland Barthes (1973: 78–80) essay ‘Ornamental cuisine’. (Barthes did not show any understanding of the historical origins of the style, however; see Stephen Mennell (1985: 250–54).) Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (2000) speak similarly of ‘decorative sociology’. ↗[#N13-pt1]
14. Eric Dunning and I later translated it into English (Elias, 2013). ↗[#N14-pt1]
15. This cultural trait has a long history and it is related, through the Enlightenment assumptions of the Founding Fathers, to the central presuppositions of Western philosophical epistemology. The preoccupation with the false question of how ‘the individual’ knows what the individual knows was lampooned by Elias:  
There is an obvious way of escape from the impasse where, for centuries, transcendental philosophers have found themselves trapped. That way, however, is closed to them. They cannot use it without losing their identity. They are like people enclosed in a room from which they try to escape. They try to unlock the windows, but the windows resist. They climb up the chimney, but the chimney is blocked. Yet the door is not locked; it is open all the time. If they only knew it, they could easily leave the room. But they cannot open the door, because to do so would disagree with the rules of the game which they as philosophers have set themselves. They cannot open the door, because that would not be philosophical. (Elias, 2009b: 117–18)  
It would also be un-American. ↗[#N15-pt1]
16. There are a few exceptions, cases where sociological jargon has entered the language. An example is ‘unintended consequences’, but, devoid of its wider theoretical context, that term carries little insight into social processes. ↗[#N16-pt1]
17. Bryan Fanning (2008: especially pp. 132–33), argues that the Roman Catholic church’s ‘clerical sociology’ stymied the development of the subject in Ireland, because of its aversion to theory (for example theories that examined religion as a mere social fact). Theory was problematic, but narrow empiricism proved acceptable. See also Fanning and Hess (2015), which describes the dominant status of ESRI/Nuffield College empirical sociology over a weaker university-based ‘interpretative sociology’. ↗[#N17-pt1]
18. A similar failure of understanding underpins the inability of the US to monopolise the means of violence *within* its own territory. For an Eliasian interpretation of this, see Pieter Spierenburg (2006). ↗[#N18-pt1]

## Bibliography

Abrams, Mark and Richard Rose (1960) *Must Labour Lose?* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Barthes, Roland (1973) ‘Ornamental cuisine’, in *Mythologies*, London: Granada, 1973, pp. 78–80.

Bergh, Godfried van Benthem van den (1977) ‘Attribution of blame as the past and present means of orientation: the social sciences as a potential improvement’,  
<http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/network/essays.php>  
[<http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/network/essays.php>], accessed 31 December 2016. [The text cited here is derived from the typescript of the author's own English translation, 1977. The essay was first published in Dutch as ‘De schuldvraag als oriëntatiemiddel’, in *De Gids*, 141 (1978), pp. 638–60, and reprinted in Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, *De staat van geweld en andere essays* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1980), pp. 7–46. A shortened version was published in English in Raymond Apthorpe and Andras Krahl (eds), *Development Studies: Critique and Renewal* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), pp. 109–35.]

Blau, Peter M. (1964) *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York: Wiley.

- Broadhurst, Roderic, Thierry Bouhours and Brigitte Bouhours (2015), *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bucholtz, Marta (2015) *A Global Community of Self-Defense*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Collins, Randall (2004) *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Craib, Ian (1984) *Modern Social Theory: from Parsons to Habermas*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf,
- Crosland, C. A. R. (1956) *The Future of Socialism*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956.
- Dawe, Alan (1970) 'The two sociologies', *British Journal of Sociology*, 21: 2, pp. 207–18.
- Dunning, Eric (1977) 'In defence of developmental sociology: a critique of Popper's *Poverty of Historicism* with special reference to the theory of Auguste Comte', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 4: 3, pp. 327–49.
- Dunning, Eric and Jason Hughes (2013) *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Elias, Norbert (2006) *The Court Society*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 2].
- Elias, Norbert (2007) *Involvement and Detachment*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 8].
- Elias, Norbert (2009a) 'The retreat of sociologists into the present', in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 16], pp. 107–126.
- Elias, Norbert (2009b) 'Scientific establishments', in *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 14], pp. 107–60.
- Elias, Norbert (2010) *The Society of Individuals*. Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 10].
- Elias, Norbert (2012 [1939]) *On the Process of Civilisation*. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 3] Earlier editions published in two volumes in 1978 and 1982, then in one volume in 1994 and 2000, all appeared under the title *The Civilizing Process*.
- Elias, Norbert (2013 [1989]) *Studies on the Germans: Power Struggles and the development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell. Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, vol. 11].
- Fanning, Bryan (2008) *The Quest for Modern Ireland: The Battle of Ideas 1912–1986*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.
- Fanning, Bryan and Andreas Hess (2015) *Sociology in Ireland: A Short History*. London: Palgrave.
- Goldthorpe, John H. (2000 [1994]) 'The uses of history in sociology: reflections on some recent trends', in *On Sociology: Numbers, Narratives and the Integration of Research and Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 28–44.
- Goldthorpe, John H., David Lockwood, Frank Bechofer and Jennifer Platt (1968–9) *The Affluent Worker*. 3 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Górnicka, Barbara, Katie Liston and Stephen Mennell (2015), 'Twenty-five years on: Norbert Elias's intellectual legacy 1990–2015', *Human Figurations* 4: 3 (2015):  
[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.3?\\*rgn=full+text](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.3?*rgn=full+text)  
[\[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.3?\\*rgn=full+text\]](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.3?*rgn=full+text), accessed 31 December 2016.
- Goudsblom, Johan (1996) 'Human history and long-term social processes: toward a synthesis of chronology and phaseology', in Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones and Stephen Mennell, *The Course of Human History:*

*Economic Growth, Social Process, and Civilization*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, pp. 15–30.

Hoggart, Richard (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Homans, George C. (1961) *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Inglis, Tom (1987) *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.  
[Revised and enlarged edition, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, Dublin: UCD Press, 1998.]

Jackson, Brian and Dennis Marsden (1962), *Education and the Working Class*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kilminster, Richard (2004) 'From distance to detachment: knowledge and self-knowledge in Elias's theory of involvement and detachment', in Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley (eds), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 25–41.

Kunzru, Hari (2015) 'People have talked of a post-racial America ever since I moved here. It still hasn't happened', *The Guardian*, 14 November.

Linklater, Andrew (2011) *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington (1889 [1829]) 'Mill on Government', in *Macaulay's Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches*, ed. George Otto Trevelyan, London: Longmans, Green, 1889, pp. 160–83.

Mann, Michael (1994) 'In praise of macrosociology: a reply to Goldthorpe', *British Journal of Sociology*, 45, pp. 39–52.

Mennell, Stephen (1974) *Sociological Theory: Uses and Unities*. London: Thomas Nelson.

Mennell, Stephen (1977) "Individual action" and its "social" consequences in the work of Elias', in P. R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (eds), *Human Figurations: Essays for Norbert Elias*, Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift, pp. 99–109.

Mennell, Stephen (1985) *All Manners of Food*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mennell, Stephen (1989) *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image*. Oxford: Blackwell.  
[Paperback editions, with an Afterword, published under the title *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* by Blackwell in 1992 and by UCD Press in 1998.]

Mennell, Stephen (2006) 'Elias and the counter-ego', *History of the Human Sciences*, 19, pp. 73–91.

Mennell, Stephen (2007) *The American Civilizing Process*. Cambridge: Polity.

Mennell, Stephen (2015) 'Explaining American hypocrisy', *Human Figurations* 4: 2.  
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.202/—explaining-american-hypocrisy?rgn=main;view=fulltext> [<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.202/—explaining-american-hypocrisy?rgn=main;view=fulltext>]. (accessed 31 December 2016)

Mills, C. Wright (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Newman, John Henry (1864) *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green.

P. R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte, eds (1977), *Human Figurations: Essays for/Aufsätze für Norbert Elias*. Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift.

Parsons, Talcott (1937) *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: McGraw Hill.



- Parsons, Talcott (1970) 'On building social system theory: a personal history', *Daedalus*, 99: 4, pp. 826–81.
- Parsons, Talcott and Edward A. Shils, with the assistance of James Olds (1951), 'Values, motives and systems of action', in Parsons and Shils (eds), *Toward a General Theory of Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 45–275.
- Pinker, Steven (2011) *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. London: Allen Lane.
- Popper, Karl R. (1957) *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge.
- Rojek, Chris and Bryan S. Turner (2000), 'Decorative Sociology', *Sociological Review*, 48: 4, pp. 629–48.
- Rosenthal, Gabriele, ed. (2015) *Etablierte und Aussenseiter zugleich*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.
- Simmel, Georg (1950 [1908]) 'On the significance of numbers for social life', in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, pp. 87–104.
- Spierenburg, Pieter (2006) 'Democracy came too early: a tentative explanation for the problem of American homicide', *American Historical Review*, 111: 1, pp. 104–14.
- Wouters, Cas and Stephen Mennell (2015), 'Discussing theories and processes of civilisation and informalisation: criteriology', in *Human Figurations* 4: 2 (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.302/--discussing-theories-and-processes-of-civilisation?rgn=main;view=fulltext> [<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.302/--discussing-theories-and-processes-of-civilisation?rgn=main;view=fulltext>], accessed 31 December 2016).
- Zweig, Ferdynand (1960) *The Worker in an Affluent Society*. London: Heinemann.

## Biographical note:

Stephen Mennell is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at University College Dublin, from which he retired in 2009. He read economics at Cambridge (1963–66), and then spent the year 1966–67 in the old Department of Social Relations at Harvard, before teaching at the University of Exeter (1967–1990) and at Monash University, Australia (1990–93). His books include: *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1985), *Norbert Elias: Civilisation and the Human Self-Image* (1989; paperback *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, 1992, 1998), and *The American Civilizing Process* (2007). He holds the degrees of Doctor in de Sociale Wetenschappen (Amsterdam) and Doctor of Letters (Cambridge). He is a member of the Board of the Norbert Elias Foundation, Amsterdam, of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, of the Royal Irish Academy, and of Academia Europaea.

Hosted by [Michigan Publishing](#), a division of the [University of Michigan Library](#).

For more information please contact [mplib-help@umich.edu](mailto:mplib-help@umich.edu).

Online ISSN: 2166-6644