

Editor's Introduction

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Since its inception, this journal has been fortunate to receive submissions from Emeritus Professors who baulk from the very notion of 'retirement' and create for the reader time, space and considerable insight into the origins of ideas, otherwise appearing commonplace today. Such authors rail against hodiocentrism for one. This issue features three such contributions from Professors Stephen Mennell, Hugh Ridley and Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, of University College Dublin (Mennell and Ridley) and the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, respectively. We believe it is the more enriched as a result. Mennell examines Elias's intense dislike of the work of Karl Popper while van den Bergh examines German philosopher, Herder's, idea of the nation. On a different but connected tack, Ridley ventures into the sociology of crosswords, a most worthwhile venture. All three take us back in time and offer a tour de force of the sociology of knowledge, with various historical entry points. Given the increasing demands made of the full-time academic today, such papers are typically not produced, because discussions of the kind you are about to read are regarded by some – university research administrators and the like – as less impactful and less important. As Ridley himself notes elsewhere (in *The Irish Times* in 2016), there are always misconceptions, prejudices and folklore about the difficulties, usefulness and costs of subjects and research in education. 'The short-termism in "results-driven" science ... is as likely to destroy proper science as to damage the humanities' (<https://bit.ly/2IJr29F> [<https://bit.ly/2IJr29F>]).

Mennell is, of course, as active now, in intellectual terms, as he was when Chair of Sociology, at University College Dublin. In the 1990s, when I began my undergraduate career at UCD, research practices in the social sciences drew from the positivist model (e.g. survey research drawing on quantitative aggregated data sets) espoused by Popper amongst others. Mennell suggests that while Elias never mentioned having met Karl Popper, he (Elias) hated Popper intensely. This intense dislike was on intellectual grounds as far as can be ascertained but, like all good 'figurati', we should say that the door is always open to scholars to probe and test every claim on the basis of new and old evidence. Murphy's contribution on *The Medieval Housebook* in this journal (2015: Vol 4, Issue 3) is one such example of the latter. But to return to Mennell: Elias's concern was with Popper's epistemology, his model of science and the principle of falsifiability. Mennell offers a wide-ranging insight into the origins of Elias's antipathy, lying as they do in ideas about science and non-science (e.g. the autonomy of philosophy and so on) and the very belief in a single eternal logic of science. This paper is therefore as relevant to scientific practices today as it was in the 1930s.

Van den Bergh's historical entry point is earlier, specifically the late 1700s, when he argues that Johann Gottfried Herder was the first to use the modern concept of the nation. Herder, it is argued, insisted on an apolitical idea of the nation that emerged for him as the only possible growing source of resistance to dynastic states such as Prussia. As van den Bergh acknowledges, this idea of the nation as un- or apolitical could be fact be a political perspective. Because Herder is not that well known, van den Bergh offers a very useful biography of his life. This is followed by a test case of Herder's idea that nations were entities with a specific language and cultural properties, the case in point being the Lazi who live near Trabzon in Turkey, and number some 100,000. Van den Bergh argues that Herder should not be seen as a nationalist in the modern sense but that the transformation of Herder's moral view of a nation into the current perspective of nations and nationalism

is clear – this moral view of the character of nations was politicised a century later. Van den Bergh also argues that Herder's belief in the peaceful character of satisfied nations was a dream. For van den Bergh, nations are conceived as processes (an Eliasian analysis) or they can be treated as myths or symbols believed or invented for political reasons. He does not ignore a snag however: when all social classes identify with a state as a nation, at the same time they may not identify with their counterparts on the other side of borders and even with foreigners as refugees. Van den Bergh concludes by suggesting that the concept of nation will remain contested and that Herder could not foresee that his own criteria for the idea of the nation could justify war and oppression.

Ridley, Emeritus Professor of German, would, I think, be a most interesting dinner companion for all those who enjoy crosswords. As he notes, we are still awaiting a sociological study of crosswords, this being a significant deficit in the literature on sport and games. Crosswords are a mass sport, my own mother being a lifelong competitor (!), but both the puzzles and their potential solvers are a fascinating case study for sociologists. Ridley draws his examples from English-language crosswords and, for reasons that become clear in his paper, this language has affected the nature of the crossword puzzle itself. In his brief introduction to the history of crosswords, entry points being the first decades of the twentieth century when the first recognizable example appeared in the USA and much earlier, word and letter games and puzzles in the Middle Ages and in Ancient Greece. Ridley argues that the more recent history of the crossword is as dominated by stereotypes of cultural superiority as in the worst days of great power rivalry and imperialism. Crosswords also reveal a nation's cultural capital, they take on class character and assume national characteristics. In my own personal case, my mother, using the latest technologies (a screenshot via her iPhone) will send me, on a regular basis, the image of the incomplete crossword puzzle followed by the unsolved clue. Unsaid, we bring to life a shared lifelong practice in which we seek to solve this by our own means, oftentimes over many days. These days, our aim is to avoid any Internet search but hard copies of any available dictionary are permitted, assuming of course that the characteristics of the crossword puzzle itself match those of a standardised lexicography. We, unlike the example cited by Ridley of the tourist sitting in first class, do not see such crosswords (in *Ireland's Own*) as a form of cultural superiority. But such discriminations and hierarchies are of course mapped onto and built into cultural practices and the search for distinction. Crosswords are part of the cement of societies as Ridley puts it. He suggests that crosswords offer partial illustrations of Elias's Game Theory in that, while they are characteristic of other sport evolutions and are no less rule bound than other forms of sport, their use of a national language means that they have preserved far greater cultural specificity than other sports. The study of crosswords certainly demands criteria beyond the game theory beloved of economists and corporate managers, and comparative research seems likely to reveal that no society can write in 1 Across with an entirely clear conscience!

In a different but nonetheless related vein to that of Mennell, Robert van Krieken examines the relationship between two individuals, who never met but whose intellectual ideas are linked and significant in a number of ways. Menno Ter Braak was the first Dutch writer to recognise, understand and appreciate Elias's book *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* first published in 1939, and two of Ter Braak's articles, translated and published here in English for the first time, played a crucial role in the reception of Elias's work in the Netherlands and beyond. The first is 'The age of kitsch' and the second 'The word civilization'. Ter Braak's biographer, Leon Hanssen, surmises that Ter Braak must have received his review copy of the first volume of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* in August 1939. Unlike others who misread Elias's work on civilization, van Krieken argues that Ter Braak grasped its nuances immediately. First published in 1935 and 1939, Ter Braak's reading of Elias had important effects, then, and will do so today, given the light that is shed onto the history of Elias's intellectual trajectory.

Arguments about the ideals of modernity and concurrent political struggles are linked to those over art (avant-garde and other forms) and to kitsch. For Adorno and others, the growing popularity of kitsch was a threat to high culture, a term used in differing ways but whose most common usage is to denote a set of cultural 'products', held in esteem by various cultures. Marcel van den Haak examines the contrasting definitions of high culture: some associated with classical art, some with modern artistic innovation and originality and others with a combination of both. Van den Haak sets out to solve an apparent paradox: the alleged waning of the division between high and low culture and yet the continued widespread usage of these concepts at the same time. He does so by reinterpreting the sociogenesis of these varied ideas behind so-called high culture and then, drawing on empirical data from people in the Netherlands, he analyses perceptions of high and low culture today. In short, he seeks to disentangle people's perceptions of cultural hierarchy from their hierarchical practices, i.e. cultural distinction. For van den Haak, there were some early clues in this explanation (from Holt and Lizardo, for example) but they did not draw a more complete picture. His data lead him to conclude that the 'classic' idea of high culture is more prominent people's perception of cultural hierarchy where the 'modern' logic shapes everyday distinctive practices, there also being room for general perceptions of cultural hierarchy to change into the future.

The last of our series of papers in this first issue of 2018 also draws from the work of Elias. In her discussion of 'Thinking with Elias', Emilia Sereva, a research assistant at the University of Edinburgh, reflects on her experience of reading the entire eighteen volumes of the *Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, the largest collection of his writings in English to date. As she notes, there has not yet been a discussion that has used the entire set in research, rather particular aspects for particular research purposes. Sereva explores her using the entire *Works* as a dataset, she comments on the particular approaches to reading employed in the process – hers was the aim of reading generously to make sense of theories on their own terms without the imposition of an agenda from elsewhere – and she details the learning that emerged as a result. Being sensitive to the temporal order of writing, Sereva started 'at the beginning' by following the date order of publication. This method revealed that Elias's ideas developed over time in tandem with his changing thinking and a range of other influential factors. Sereva also sought to apply the benefit of doubt in this process. In so doing, she found that it was her rather than Elias who had missed the point of what he was doing. Accordingly, she argues that thinking with Elias invites and requires independent and original thought, concepts and ideas always being re-thought in different contexts. In disagreeing with Rojek and Turner's criticism of the absence of a precise method or framework for applying concepts, Sereva argues that there is sufficient indication in Elias's discussion of figuration, for instance, and the involvement-detachment balance, to conclude that this was deliberate. For her, Elias wanted process sociologists of the future to think for themselves and to use his work in new contexts. What did Sereva learn? 1. The specificity of context in that Elias did not merely apply the same ideas in exactly the same ways. 2. Thinking with Elias in daily life is also helpful. 3. There is a method of working or a model that can be gleaned through Elias's case studies. Reading them consecutively and as a set, Sereva argues that a pattern emerges which points up how to go about doing sociology the Eliasian way. She puts Elias's ideas to work, specifically the concept of figuration, by exploring how things have unfolded in the present and remembered past for groups of funeral directors and their firms. She concludes by posing an interesting question: were he alive today, how would Elias have chosen to arrange his pieces into a collected set. She remains curious about how different ordering structures may provide still different interpretations of the unfolding of process sociology and Elias's process of thinking.

If you, like William Cowper, agree that variety is the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavour, then the first issue of 2018 will indeed satiate that need.

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