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Norbert Elias as a Teacher: An Autobiographical Account

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[Norbert Elias as a Teacher]

An Autobiographical Account

1. Introduction

'Beyond dichotomous thinking' is an appropriate title for a conference about Norbert Elias. It is a good idea, for a change, not to start from *The Civilizing Process* (1939), but rather from the book that was intended to be its companion volume, *The Society of Individuals* (1987). Both books were originally written in German, in the late 1930s. For me, the very title of *The Society of Individuals* evokes memories of the 1950s when, as a student, I tried to find that book. I searched in vain, for although its publication had been announced, it was never actually published.

In this paper I shall mix personal reminiscences and theoretical reflections. I hope to show that there is no dichotomy between these two approaches – just as there is no dichotomy between involvement and detachment. As the title and subtitle indicate, I shall give a brief autobiographical account of my own relationship to Norbert Elias. Like any social relationship, this relationship should not be seen as static and unchanging, but as a process. And, like most processes, it can be described in terms of stages or phases. Today I can clearly distinguish four successive phases but, obviously, as long as I was going through one of the earlier phases, I could not possibly take a view of the entire process.

In retrospect, I recognize four phases:

1. During Phase 1 (1932–50) I had no knowledge at all about Norbert Elias. I lived, like practically everybody else, in complete *ignorance* about his life and work and, consequently, also in complete detachment.

2. Phase 2 (1950–70) was a phase of *apprenticeship*. I learned about Norbert Elias, first through references to his work, then by reading the published texts of Elias to which I had access, and then, since 1956, also in personal contact with Elias himself. This stage was marked by increasing involvement.

3. During Phase 3 (1970–90), a phase of *advocacy*, my involvement continued to be strong. I spent a great deal of time and effort in drawing attention to Elias's work and praising its qualities, first in my own country, the Netherlands, then also abroad.

4. In Phase 4 (1990 to the present) I have not given up learning from Elias's work and recommending it to others, but I also try to go *beyond Elias*. While my attitude toward his work has become somewhat more detached, I continue to think very highly of it and, therefore, I remain intellectually and emotionally involved.



2. Panorama

Before proceeding to a more detailed account of my personal story, I shall insert a brief sketch of the overall historical development of sociology, also in 'phases', in order to see the larger professional context within which my encounters with Elias took place. I do not wish to create confusion with two different sets of phases, but this far more general 'phaseological' scheme has the advantage of putting both Elias's and my own work in a much broader temporal framework. Such a broad schema facilitates greater 'detachment'.

Restricting myself to the Western world, I distinguish five successive phases, according to the same 'phaseological' principle: the phases form a sequence that has a certain plausible and irreversible order: it is impossible and inconceivable that the sequence could be reversed so that later phases would have preceded the earlier phases.

1. Phase 1 (prior to 1830) comprises the long era from Greek and Roman antiquity to the nineteenth century. During this phase, sociology did not exist as a distinct intellectual discipline with a name of its own but, nevertheless, there were plenty of traces of 'proto-sociology' – ideas and opinions about human society in the guises of philosophy or history. Thus, in the 'philosophical' tradition from Plato to Hegel, and in the tradition of 'history' from Thucydides to von Ranke, we encounter many ideas that were at a later stage incorporated into what came to be known as sociology.

2. Phase 2 (1830–90) witnessed the emergence of a conception of sociology as a discipline – a highly ambitious project initiated by intellectuals such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer who were not attached to a university and therefore not hampered by existing departmental divisions. In their view, sociology would be the master social science, the grand synthesis of history, anthropology, and psychology. And its scope would be so large that it would eventually supersede both theology and philosophy.

3. Phase 3 (1890–1930) brought the formation of sociology as an academic discipline with national traditions represented by such men as Weber, Durkheim, Hobhouse, and Pareto. One lesson the first generation of academic sociologists learned and then promulgated was disciplinary modesty. Sociology would have to give up any claim to preside over all other disciplines and be content with a place next to them, next to law, political science, economics, anthropology, psychology and history. This process of accommodation implied a considerable restriction of intellectual scope, especially in so far as the study of 'the individual' was left to the psychologists, and the study of 'the past' to historians.

4. Phase 4 (1930–70) was marked by the formation of an internationally organized discipline with a clear hierarchical structure. Socially it found its major organization in the International Sociological Association, the ISA. Culturally it was strongly committed to ideas that assigned a well-defined specific place to sociology amidst the other social sciences.

5. Phase 5 (1970 to the present) began with 'the crisis of Western sociology', marked by a proliferation of diverging theoretical viewpoints and highly specialized semi-autonomous sub-disciplines. The resulting fragmentation led to a renewed search for a synthesis, the Holy Grail of 'paradigm regained'.

Like the earlier model of four phases in my own relationship with Norbert Elias, this five-stage model of the development of sociology presents a succession of phases with an irreversible order. It is inconceivable



that a later phase would have occurred without the preceding phases. At the same time, it is equally unlikely that there was a teleologically ordained ‘necessity’ that made the emergence of the later phases already ‘inevitable’ at the start of the first phase. The development of sociology typically represents a social and cultural process that resulted from deliberate intentions and actions, but whose actual course was unforeseen and unintended.

Norbert Elias lived through Phases 3–5; I lived through Phase 4 and am still alive in Phase 5. In my view, one of the great merits of Elias’s work is that, in contrast to all the dominant sociologists of Phases 3 to 5, Elias did not flatly reject the legacy of Phase 2, and was even susceptible to ideas formulated in Phase 1.

3. Personal account: phases 1 and 2

I shall now return to my personal account and fill in the schema of phases with more detailed information. I am aware that I cannot be fully sure about which facts are most relevant in this context. Does my affinity with Elias’s way of thinking have to do with the fact that, like him, I am an only child? Or with the fact that, again like Elias, I was raised as an agnostic in terms of religion? Various intellectual stimuli during my student days certainly helped to make Elias’s work congenial to me. When I first came across it I had already acquired a basic knowledge of social psychology combined with an interest in literature, history, philosophy, and psychology. I knew that social psychology as a discipline sadly lacked a macro-sociological and an historical dimension.

All these experiences helped to create a receptive attitude to Elias’s work. I was prepared for a detached scholarly attitude toward the social world. I sensed that there were no clear boundaries between past and present, nor between individual and society. I realized that an academic system that was built on respect for these boundaries was in contradiction with social reality.

Being mentally prepared for a positive response to Elias’s work is one thing, actually coming into contact with it is another matter. How did I first come to know about Norbert Elias at all? How did I pass from Phase 1 (ignorance) to Phase 2 (apprenticeship)? I am now more aware than I was at the time that I learned about Elias through two very different channels: sociology and literature. Both channels reached me through Dutch side channels. At the time, I was too much involved in finding my way in both channels to realise that they followed separate courses in a continental European estuary. Nor did I see that in the channels of literature and journalism the ancient tradition of proto-sociology was carried on – as it still is today (under such labels as ‘non-fiction’ and ‘op-ed’).

Two Dutch names are important for reconstructing the networks through which the name of Norbert Elias reached me: Menno ter Braak and W.A. Bonger. Ter Braak (1902–1940), an essayist and literary critic, wrote a laudatory review of the first volume of *The Civilizing Process* soon after its first publication in 1939: I read this review in ter Braak’s collected works (1949-1951). W. A. Bonger (1876–1940) was an academic, a professor of criminology and sociology. He also wrote a laudatory review of *The Civilizing Process*, published in 1940. My own teacher of sociology, A. N. J. den Hollander, had been a student of Bonger’s, and I am pretty sure it was through Bonger that he came to know about Norbert Elias; he mentioned *The Civilizing Process* in one of his introductory lectures, and on the strength of this double recommendation I took the book out of the library, read it and was deeply impressed. I was ‘hooked’.

It may all sound a bit trivial, but it is worth pursuing the matter a bit further. There is one poignant fact worth mentioning in particular. On May 10, 1940, the German army and air force invaded the Netherlands. Four days later, on May 14, the Dutch government capitulated, and the Netherlands became a German occupied country. On that fateful day both ter Braak and Bonger committed suicide. Neither of them was Jewish. But both of them were outspoken opponents of fascism and National Socialism. For both of them the prospect of living under a Nazi regime was frightening and unacceptable. This conviction they had in common, in addition to their great appreciation of Elias. I mention these facts because they point to an aspect of *The Civilizing Process* that is often overlooked and sometimes downright denied: that Elias, like Thucydides, had written his book in exile, as an attempt to gain a better understanding of the historical forces that had shaped his contemporary social world.

There is yet another seemingly trivial question I did not bother to ask at the time. How did ter Braak and Bonger learn about Norbert Elias and his great book? What made them take the trouble to read and review it? In both cases, there were personal connections. For ter Braak, the link was with the German author Klaus Mann, a son of Thomas Mann, who edited a literary journal – *Die Sammlung* – published in the Netherlands for German writers in exile from the Nazi regime. Norbert Elias had published an article on ‘Kitsch’ in this journal (1935) and ter Braak read it, and liked it very much. For Bonger, the link was most probably Karl Mannheim, the sociologist with whom Elias had studied and collaborated in Heidelberg and Frankfurt. Mannheim once came to Amsterdam to give a public lecture, and visited Bonger. Today, most readers will be less familiar with the names of Klaus Mann and Karl Mannheim than with Norbert Elias. At the time, however, in the late 1930s, and still continuing in the 1950s, it was the other way around: Klaus Mann and Karl Mannheim were far better known than Norbert Elias.

In the early 1950s, I tried to find out as much as I could about Norbert Elias and to read everything he had published – which turned out to be not much, apart from *The Civilizing Process* and the article on ‘Kitsch’¹. And then, to my great surprise, in 1956, at the Third World Congress of Sociology, which happened to take place in Amsterdam, I saw on the list of participants the name of N. Elias, Leicester. It did not take long for me to find out that this was indeed the author of *The Civilizing Process*. I was introduced to him, and, again to my great surprise, he invited me to have dinner with him. I felt greatly honoured, since I was still a student, and in my view Elias was one of the great masters of sociology. I had no idea how marginal his position was.

So the two of us had dinner, and we became friends. I graduated and started to work on my PhD thesis. I visited Elias in Leicester a couple of times, and we exchanged letters. This was in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the peak of Phase 4 when sociology was in full swing as a well-organized social and cultural ‘system’, with an international organization and orientation, under American leadership that was virtually undisputed. There was a dominant paradigm – structural functionalism – and one towering authority in matters of theory: Talcott Parsons.

As the subject of my PhD thesis I chose nihilism. In my approach I tried to find guidance from both Parsons and Elias. Elias never fully approved of either my subject or my approach. He found my fascination

¹ I missed, however, Elias’s article on the expulsion of the Huguenots from France (1935), and his two contributions to the «British Journal of Sociology», published in 1950 and 1956.

with nihilism puzzling, he thought I gave too much weight to the concept of culture, and, worst of all, he had no use for the theories of Talcott Parsons.

In the years that followed, from 1960 onwards, I was a teacher of sociology, and I gradually moved away from Parsons' theoretical system because I found it too scholastic, too strongly committed to the ideal of fitting everything into ingeniously constructed schemes, with which I did not wish to burden my students. Especially toward the end of the 1960s, when I read the manuscript of *What is Sociology?* (published in 1970) and the newly written introduction to the second German edition of *The Civilizing Process* (1969), I realized that these writings contained a major theoretical breakthrough. I wrote a review article in a Dutch sociological journal (1970), in which I argued that Elias's work represented a new paradigm in sociology, based on ideas that were often diametrically opposed to those of Parsons. Elias was not the only one in those days to criticize Parsons and structural functionalism. Many were far more vociferous, notably Alvin Gouldner, and a number of authors of Marxist persuasion such as Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. In my view, Elias's critique was better balanced, more consistent, and superior in scope and relevance.

In the mean time, I had become a full professor of sociology. I acquired a position in which I could take my own stance in the discussions that were going on at the time. That stance was solidly based on what I now referred to as the 'paradigm' developed by Elias.

4. Phases 3 and 4

I thus entered the third phase in my relationship to Norbert Elias, the phase of advocacy. I shall skip this phase and limit myself to a few words about the current phase, which I sometimes call 'beyond Elias'. Employing what I had learned from Elias I turned my attention to new themes, such as the domestication of fire; the link between biological evolution and the civilizing process; and, most generally, a sociological inquiry into the expansion of the human world, the anthroposphere, within the biosphere. In all these studies I have continued to follow the figurational approach. It is from this perspective that I perceive the changing relationships between humans and animals, or rather, between humans and *other* animals.

The concept of 'figuration' in the way Elias used it is often understood as a mere variation on the homily 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts'. There is more than that to the concept, however. It implies that the 'parts' are shaped by their relations to each other. Thus, for example, the very 'nature' of humans has been shaped, and continues to be shaped, by their relations to the other animals with whom they form social figurations – in particular by the balances of power inherent in those relations. Of course, humans are unique; but so is every animal species. The point is that the differences that make humans truly 'human' have developed in evolutionary processes which have always been co-evolutionary: species evolved in interdependence with each other.

Using the concept of figurations runs counter to the tendency of thinking in dichotomies. In this paper I have used it explicitly only in the final paragraphs. But it has guided my thinking about the history of sociology, and Norbert Elias's own unique place in this history. In his writings Elias spanned the five phases I have distinguished in the development of sociology. This, I now realise, has been one of the reasons why I found his work so refreshing and illuminating. He was fully aware of the long tradition of proto-sociology – and often referred to it, critically but also with an appreciation for the ways our early predecessors handled the

problems they were tackling. His chapter on Comte in *What is Sociology?* (1970) is exemplary in this respect. Elias rarely discussed at length his predecessors from Phase 3. But it is clear that he learned a great deal from Weber and Durkheim, and was able somehow to solve the contradictions between their approaches. During Phase 4, Elias's place in the discipline seemed marginal. In Phase 5 it turned out to be central: it addressed basic issues and it pointed toward a new synthesis, beyond the dichotomies that continued to haunt the discipline.

In the terminology I used in my book *Nihilism and Culture* (1960): Elias was for a long time socially marginal; but intellectually, 'culturally', he had always been at the core, ever since he entered the field of sociology.

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