

for Stephen, J. Pop.

Sonderdruck aus:

SOCIOLOGIA INTERNATIONALIS

Internationale Zeitschrift für Soziologie
Kommunikations- und Kulturforschung

Herausgegeben von

Eckart Pankoke, Justin Stagl, Johannes Weiß
Michel Maffesoli

Inhalt des Heftes

Karsten Fischer: Tabuisierung und Rationalisierung

Johan Goudsblom: Norbert Elias and American Sociology

Jürgen Gerhards und Jörg Rössel:

Akteure, Interessen und Deutungsmuster: Eine kultursoziologische Analyse
der Debatte über das gleiche Wahlrecht in Preußen (1890 – 1918)

Vera Sparschuh:

Der Generationsauftrag – bewußtes Erbe oder „implizites Wissen“?

Marcel Cornis-Pope, Thomas F. X. Noble, and Justin Stagl:
Perspectives on Europe



38. Band 2000 Heft 2

DUNCKER & HUMBLLOT · BERLIN

NORBERT ELIAS AND AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

By Johan Goudsblom, Amsterdam

In this article I shall raise four questions about the relationship between the great European sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) and American sociology. 1. What did Elias know and think of American sociology? 2. What did American sociologists know and think of Elias? 3. Could Elias have profited more from the contributions of American sociology? 4. Could American sociology have profited more from Elias's work? The last question also pertains to the present: what makes Elias's work still interesting and important for (American) sociologists today?

I. What did Elias know and think of American sociology?

As a sociologist, Elias was originally steeped in German traditions. Like most others of his generation, he was deeply influenced by the writings of Max Weber (who had died by the time Elias came to Heidelberg, so that Elias never met him in person), and, partly through Weber, by marxism and the discussions it aroused. Among Elias' contemporaries, the one sociologist who made the greatest impact upon his thinking was Karl Mannheim.

In addition to German sociology, Elias read widely in French and German historiography. He quoted from Lucien Febvre and Marcel Bloch long before the *Annales* School became famous. He was also deeply impressed by the ideas of Freud and 'the school of psychoanalysis'.

American sociology played hardly any part in his early work. His unpublished *Habilitationsschrift* on court society, finished in 1933, contained two passing references to Thorstein Veblen: one appreciative, one critical (Elias 1983: 63, 67) – and that was all.

Immediately after completing the study on court society, in the spring of 1933, Elias fled from Germany. He took refuge from the Nazi regime, first in France, and then in England. In London he wrote what was to become his major work, *The Civilizing Process*. The footnotes which he added before sending the second volume of that work to print reveal how Elias began to make himself more familiar with Anglo-Saxon wri-

ters. He made occasional references to American psychologists, from whom he borrowed the concept of conditioning, and to some older American anthropologists and sociologists, such as William Graham Sumner and W. F. Ogburn. These footnote references seem to have been intended especially to sound out parallels between Elias's own approach and that of British and American colleagues – although the comments on Sumner are fairly critical (Elias 1994a: 537).

It was only much later, after 1954, when Elias had acquired his first tenured university post as a teacher of sociology at Leicester University, that he felt the urge to comment at greater length on the work of contemporary American sociologists. He singled out the two men who dominated the sociological scene in England as well as the United States: Talcott Parsons (cf. Elias 1994a: 185–204) and Robert Merton (cf. Elias 1978: 177; Elias and Scotson 1994: 177–81). Elias criticized their position severely. He argued (1) that Parsons and Merton started from an erroneous opposition between 'social system' and 'personality', analyzing the social system as if it could be seen in isolation from the individuals composing it, and (2) that they failed to take into account the developmental flow of all social and cultural life. In other words, they adhered to a narrow conception of sociology which unduly cut the field off from both psychology and history, and presented a picture of human society that was far too static and too harmonious.

In the last phase of his life, Elias returned to live on the European continent. He finally gained some success and fame. During this stage he at last had something positive to say about at least one American sociologist: Erving Goffman, whom he praised for his powers of observation, although he could not help remarking that Goffman lacked a historical perspective (cf. Goudsblom and Mennell 1997: 167).

II. What did American sociologists know and think of Norbert Elias?

Before 1939, when the first German edition of *The Civilizing Process* was published, no American sociologist could have had any notion of Elias's work. Some of his former students such as Hans Gerth and Kurt Wolff had found their way to the United States. As far as I know, however, neither Gerth nor Wolff ever referred to Elias in their publications.

The first American authors to acknowledge *The Civilizing Process* appear to have been Charles and Mary Beard who, in Volume IV of their history of American civilization (1942), summarized extensively what

Elias had written about the development of the concepts of civilization and culture in France and Germany.

Among sociologists, Elias's work remained largely unknown for several decades. It would be interesting to contrast both the tenor of, and the acclaim (or rather, the lack of acclaim) for his work with the ideas and the career of Talcott Parsons, whom Elias himself later came to regard as his most important opposite number in sociology.

Both men were of approximately the same age. They both came to sociology as what Elias would call 'first generation sociologists', Parsons having come from economics, Elias from philosophy (cf. Elias 1994b: 81–82). They published their first major works in the late 1930s: *The Structure of Social Action* in 1937, *The Civilizing Process* in 1939. These were highly ambitious, voluminous books, encompassing a wide range of subject matter. Despite these similarities, the books diverged in their substance as strongly as the careers of their authors turned out to do. *The Structure of Social Action* was written as a critical exercise in intellectual history, with the aim of laying the foundations for a general sociological theory. Elias intended *The Civilizing Process* to be both empirical and theoretical; but at first the book was mainly recognized (if it was recognized at all) as empirical.

The few references to *The Civilizing Process* that were made by American sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s concerned almost exclusively one of the more empirical parts – the part that became known, in the 1978 translation, as 'The History of Manners'. Thus in a footnote in *Behaviour in Public Places* (1963: 39) Goffman mentioned the work of Elias in one breath with Harold Nicolson's *Good Behaviour*, a typical example of the 'history of manners' genre.¹

Other American sociologists who found occasion to refer to Elias included first of all Reinhard Bendix, then Peter Berger and John Murray Cuddihy, and, after *The Civilizing Process* had become available in English, such diverse figures as Richard Sennett, Alan Sica, and Thomas Scheff. I have not made a systematic search for references in recent years; I am sure there are some – but not many. Among the most significant is the full section that George Ritzer devotes to 'Norbert Elias's figurational sociology' in the fourth edition of his textbook *Modern Sociological Theory* (1996: 375–89).

¹ As Leonard Broom told Stephen Mennell in November 1992, Edward Shils had spoken of Elias and *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation* in his graduate class at Chicago in 1949, which was attended by Broom and Goffman, among others. (Personal communication from Stephen Mennell).

III. Could Elias have profited more from American sociology?

Although Elias never seems to have made a general public statement about American sociology as such, he did have a pronounced opinion about the subject. American sociology, in his view, was heavily dominated by structural functionalism as represented in different shades by Parsons and Merton. In 1970, at a congress of the International Sociological Association in Varna, Elias and Parsons were together in a panel on sociological theory. Elias praised Parsons for his 'great gift for synthesis', but made it clear that he had absolutely no use for the way Parsons had applied that gift.

Elias was aware also of other perspectives in American sociology, such as the exchange theories of George Homans and Peter Blau. These theories, with their individualistic assumptions, were wholly anathema to him, and he never considered them worthy of any public comment.

Nor did he ever in his publications write about other currents in American sociology, which were more likely to have met with his approval. I know Elias liked *White Collar* by C. Wright Mills; but I don't think that he ever expressed that appreciation in writing. Nor did he comment on any of the symbolic interactionists, except for his praise for Goffman – in a piece that for the rest was highly critical of the phenomenological approach in sociology (cf. Goudsblom and Mennell 1998: 166–74). Nor did he ever discuss the work of historical sociologists – neither single figures in the generation of David Riesman and Reinhard Bendix, nor later representatives of more broadly operating 'schools' such as Immanuel Wallerstein or Charles Tilly.²

All this is a pity. But, on the whole, the silence was reciprocal.

IV. Could American sociologists have profited more from Elias's work?

In 1956, when I was still a student, I met Talcott Parsons at the Salzburg Seminar for American Studies. I tried to make him interested in the work of Elias. Of course, I failed (cf. Goudsblom 1977a: 86). Parsons was at that time reaching the peak of his fame; he had no need for immersing himself in the work of an obscure lone colleague-competitor in

² Elias met both Wallerstein and the world historian William McNeill at a conference organized in his honor at the ZiF in Bielefeld in 1984. Other American sociologists who attended conferences in honor of Elias included Richard Sennett and Gunther Roth (New York 1978) and Paul Starr (Apeldoorn 1987).

the field of sociology and sociological theory – a colleague whose only book thus far was a two-volume treatise, written in German and published by a little known Swiss publisher.³

There is little sense in regretting that Parsons never bothered to see how some of Elias's views might have fitted into his own theoretical framework. That would be tantamount to saying that the sculptor Henry Moore might have profited from exposing himself somewhat more to the influence of his contemporaries Jacques Lipchitz or Ossip Zadkine. Those men were each engaged in their own pursuits.

It would have been interesting indeed, however, had there been a study by someone else comparing in a systematic and critical fashion the views of Parsons and Elias. Did their views differ as profoundly as Elias himself in the introduction to the second edition of *The Civilizing Process* said they did? Would a synthesis have been completely out of the question? The problem is still open.⁴

Similarly, a comparison might have been made between *The Civilizing Process* and David Riesman's book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Riesman's work lacked the historical breadth and psychological sophistication of *The Civilizing Process*. At the same time, however, it was highly topical, and acute in observing contemporary changes in society and personality structure. A comparison would have been, and still would be, enlightening.

There are two major streams in American sociology that are in many ways congenial to Elias's ideas: symbolic interactionism and historical sociology. In all his work Elias resisted the dichotomy of 'the individual' versus 'society' – a dichotomy which is still haunting sociology in the form of the opposition between 'agency' and 'structure'. In American sociology, symbolic interactionism comes remarkably close to Elias's position in this matter. Drawing upon the tradition not only of George Herbert Mead, but, partly *via* him, of pragmatism – from Charles Pierce and William James to John Dewey –, Herbert Blumer formulated the premises of symbolic interactionism in a way that appears to be directly compatible with Elias's ideas as articulated in *The Society of Individuals* (cf. Blumer 1969: 2–6).

Historical sociologists in America have in recent years arrived at several conclusions that come remarkably close to insights which may also

³ There is a chance that Elias and Talcott Parsons met each other when Parsons studied at Heidelberg in 1925–26 (cf. Camic 1991: xix–xxi; Mennell 1989).

⁴ I myself attempted a synthesis as early as 1960 in my book on nihilism and culture, translated into English twenty years later (Goudsblom 1980). See also Mennell 1989.

be found in *The Civilizing Process*. Among these conclusions is the recognition that long-term social processes can be shown to have a structure – although they cannot be explained by one single causal force such as the means of production. Long before Charles Tilly and others, Elias pointed at the signal importance of the process of state formation in Europe. He also anticipated a later discovery of historical sociologists when he pointed out that most twentieth century sociologists were too readily inclined to take the nation state as the basic model of ‘society’, thus leaving international relations beyond the pale of sociology.

While in principle nothing stands in the way of a combination of historical sociology and symbolic interactionism, in fact the two have developed as distinct schools in American sociology. This separation seems to me regrettable – but also reparable. Both historical sociology and symbolic interactionism can be enriched, and their complementarity enhanced, by making two dimensions explicit which tend to be neglected in both traditions. One is the dimension of the emotions, which is clearly acknowledged in the way Elias incorporated insights from psychoanalysis into his sociological framework in *The Civilizing Process*. The other dimension concerns cognition: the realm of rationality, thought, knowledge, symbols, to which Elias has paid increasingly more attention in his later writings.

The challenge lies in synthesis. And here in particular Elias’s work can still be very helpful. It contains a general perspective, a series of concepts, and an array of empirical insights that may enable us to make sense of seemingly disparate and contradictory findings and ideas.

The perspective has to be applied in a critical spirit, of course. Elias himself in his later days used to say that we have to move ‘beyond Marx’ and ‘beyond Freud’. In the same fashion we now have to move beyond Elias. This means, however, that we first need to go ‘through’ his work. Too often it has been rejected on superficial grounds, by writers who had already committed themselves to their own versions of sociology and history, and had no patience for absorbing Elias’s insights. Among American sociologists, Charles Tilly may serve as an example of that attitude (cf. Tilly 1990: 85).

While grounded in sociology, Elias’s work often impinges upon other fields usually considered to be the domain of other disciplines such as history and anthropology. Therefore, if, as happens so often nowadays, we find that we have to cross disciplinary boundaries, Elias can show us ways of doing so. I myself have found it increasingly useful to combine Elias’s approach with the perspectives developed by some American

scholars in other areas, notably the anthropologist Marvin Harris and the world historian William McNeill (cf. Goudsblom 1992).

Sociologists and other social scientists in several parts of the world, mainly in Europe but elsewhere too, are now using Elias's work as a source of inspiration in their research, their theorizing, and their teaching (cf. Mennell 1992; Mennell and Goudsblom 1998). In America, appreciation is also increasing. All over the world, sociology today is badly in need of a central theory that can serve as an organizing principle and can command the same fundamental respect as the theory of evolution in biology. The sociological tradition is rich in divergent ideas. Elias's writings show that it is possible, nevertheless, to attain convergence without paying the price of inconsistency. They successfully combine major theoretical ideas stemming from the seemingly incompatible intellectual traditions represented by such thinkers as Comte, Marx, Freud, Weber, and Durkheim (Goudsblom 1977a: 78; cf. also Goudsblom 1977b). The multitude of current social and intellectual trends will make it necessary to continuously extend the range of ideas to be incorporated into a sociological synthesis. In this process, Elias's work may continue to serve as a source of inspiration for some time to come.

Works cited

- Blumer*, Herbert: Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1969. – *Camic*, Charles (ed.): Talcott Parsons. The Early Essays. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991. – *Elias*, Norbert: What is Sociology?. London: Hutchinson 1978. – *Elias*, Norbert: The Court Society. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1983. – *Elias*, Norbert: The Civilizing Process. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1994a. – *Elias*, Norbert: Reflections on a Life. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1994b. – *Elias*, Norbert/Scotson, John L.: The Established and the Outsiders. 2nd ed. London: Sage 1994. – *Goffman*, Erving: Behavior in Public places. New York: The Free Press 1963. – *Goudsblom*, Johan: 'Responses to Norbert Elias's Work in England, Germany, the Netherlands and France'. In: Peter R. Gleichmann, Johan Goudsblom and Hermann Korte (ads.), Human Figurations. Essays for/Aufsätze für Norbert Elias. Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Soziologisch Tijdschrift 1977a. – *Goudsblom*, Johan: Sociology in the Balance. A Critical Essay. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1977b. – *Goudsblom*, Johan, Nihilism and Culture. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1980. – *Goudsblom*, Johan: Fire and Civilization. London: Allen Lane/Penguin 1992. – *Goudsblom*, Johan/Mennell, Stephen (eds.): The Norbert Elias Reader. A Biographical Selection. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1998. – *Mennell*, Stephen: 'Parsons et Elias'. *Sociologie et société* 21 (1989): 69–86. – *Mennell*, Stephen/Elias, Norbert: An Introduction. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1992. – *Mennell*, Stephen/Goudsblom, Johan (eds.): Norbert Elias on Civilization, Power, and Knowledge. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998. – *Parsons*, Talcott: The Structure of Social Action. Boston: McGraw-Hill 1937. – *Riesman*, David: The Lonely

Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character. New Haven: Yale University Press 1950. – *Ritzer*, George: Modern Sociological Theory. Fourth edition. New York: McGraw-Hill 1996. – *Tilly*, Charles: Coercion, Capital, and European States. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1990.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag werden vier Fragen über das Verhältnis des großen europäischen Soziologen Norbert Elias (1897–1990) zur amerikanischen Soziologie behandelt. 1. Was wußte und hielt Elias von der amerikanischen Soziologie? 2. Was wußten und hielten amerikanische Soziologen von Norbert Elias? 3. Hätte Elias die Beiträge der amerikanischen Soziologie für sein eigenes Werk stärker ausnutzen können? 4. Hätte die amerikanische Soziologie das Werk von Elias stärker berücksichtigen können? Diese letzte Frage betrifft auch die Gegenwart: was macht heute das Werk von Elias noch immer interessant und wichtig für (amerikanische) Soziologen?

Summary

In this article four questions are raised about the relationship between the great European sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) and American sociology. 1. What did Elias know and think of American sociology? 2. What did American sociologists know and think of Elias? 3. Could Elias have profited more from the contributions of American sociology? 4. Could American sociology have profited more from Elias's work? The last question also pertains to the present: what makes Elias's work still interesting and important for (American) sociologists today?