

1 Towards a ‘central theory’: the scope and relevance of the sociology of Norbert Elias

Stephen Quilley and Steven Loyal

Introduction

There were periods during the twentieth century when sociology was imbued with a certain social and intellectual prestige. Sometimes this was for the wrong reasons, as during the late 1960s when students entering the proliferating sociology departments conflated the scientific investigation of social processes with the politics of emancipation. A decade earlier, practitioners of the newly professionalized discipline of ‘systematic sociology’ (Johnson 1960) confidently proclaimed the emergence of a ‘mature science’ (Parsons quoted in Goudsblom 1977: 23). But the accomplishments of this emerging and overly self-confident discipline were invariably disappointing. And despite the claims for a cumulative and iterative relationship between theory and empirical observation, the links remained tenuous between the theoretical edifice associated with the towering figure of Talcott Parsons and the data-gathering of mainstream sociology. Since the 1970s, the illusion of any kind of paradigmatic consensus has been shattered. Sociology remains ‘a multi-paradigmatic or multi-perspectival subject . . . conflict ridden . . . [and without any] overall consensus . . . regarding concepts, theories and methods’ (Dunning and Mennell 2003: 1). And this situation has been made considerably worse by the abandonment, by possibly a majority of sociologists, of the very idea that the investigation of social processes can be *scientific*, and by implication of the idea that it should be possible to build up, over time, a stock of reality-congruent ideas about the operation of social processes.¹

Over the last twenty years, sociology has been embroiled in self-perpetuating debates driven by the epistemological relativism associated with postmodernist social theory, Foucauldian discourse analysis and poststructuralist currents emanating from literary theory. Combined with the fact that the ‘post-Enlightenment’ nostrums of identity politics make it almost impossible to dissociate the investigation of the emergent dynamics of social processes as they *are* from statements about how we should *like* them to be, the rationale for sociology as an autonomous and

coherent field of investigation within the family of human sciences has never seemed more fragile.

This is evident in the endless proliferation of sub-disciplines reflecting the increasing division of labour and specialization in sociology: for instance, fields such as race, family, organizations, criminology and class, which at least have some empirical rationale, are now supplemented by exotic newcomers such as 'visual sociology'. Sub-disciplinary fragmentation has accompanied intellectual and empirical specialization in all areas of (natural) science. But although, in an encompassing discipline such as biology, there are bitter disputes and apparently competing forms of explanation, even antipodean areas such as molecular genetics and ecology are not intrinsically irreconcilable perspectives, but rather sub-fields corresponding to different scales and units of analysis. Moreover, the synthesis represented by the interdisciplinary field of evolutionary ecology testifies to their location within a (cumulatively) unified scientific framework. By contrast, in the absence of such a unified framework, the proliferation of sociological journals and specialisms takes on an *ad hoc* character. The differentiation and proliferation of empirical fields unfortunately owes as much to competitive institutional dynamics as to any cumulative extension in human knowledge.² Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that many sociologists have become nervous about the intellectual credibility of their discipline and have perhaps taken refuge behind impenetrable jargon and theoretical obscurantism. While the worst examples of empty scholasticism are reserved for articles in specialist journals and conference papers, more public disrobings of the Emperor, as happened in the case of the infamous Sokal affair, have periodically added to our discomfort.³

What then should we expect from sociology? The contention animating this volume is that there is a way out of this impasse. In the writings of Norbert Elias there are the beginnings of a paradigm that establishes

- (i) a coherent rationale for the relative autonomy of sociology as one discipline within a family of human sciences, and
- (ii) the proper object of sociological investigation: long-term transformations in the relations of interdependence between individuals and groups.

Upon this basis it is possible to discern the embryo of what Elias referred to as a 'central theory' and the coalescence of a figurational tradition embodying greater international, interspectival and intergenerational continuity of theorizing and research (Dunning and Mennell 2003: 2). On this foundation rests the hope of a gradual expansion in the stock of social-scientific knowledge, synthesizing the best and most productive

traditions that have periodically animated the discipline: specifically, the Marxist and Weberian historical sociology of capitalism(s); the tradition of symbolic interactionism associated with George Herbert Mead through to Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman; and in France, the tradition that eventuated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his school.

Furthermore, the theory of knowledge which underpins this incipient 'central theory' creates a platform for the integration of findings from across the full range of human sciences, from the *Annales* school in history, Schumpeterian evolutionary economics, cognitive and neurosciences, psychoanalysis, though to evolutionary archaeology and biological anthropology (see, for example, Goudsblom 1992; De Vries and Goudsblom 2002). That the discipline needs such an interdisciplinary interface is evident from the difficulty that sociologists have in thinking about 'human nature' (for instance, in relation to debates about 'race' or gender relations), and reconciling social constructionism with the realities of both (species-level) biological evolution and (individual) physiological growth and development. Eliasian conceptualizations of 'second' and 'third' nature (see Wouters, in this volume) provide the most durable riposte to indiscriminate (if often accurate) accusations of 'blank slate-ism' (Pinker 2002).

Coming out of a distinguished intellectual milieu, which also included figures such as Karl Mannheim, Erich Fromm and Theodor Adorno, Elias remained largely unrecognized by mainstream European sociology until the late 1960s. It took a further twenty years for his work to attract any significant attention among English-speaking sociologists, with the first complete publication of an English edition of *The Civilizing Process* coming only in 1978–82. Elias's relative obscurity for much of the latter half of the twentieth century stands in inverse proportion to the scope and ambition of his work. One of the remarkable aspects of *The Civilizing Process* was the mutually constitutive and historical relationship that Elias established between ontogenetic processes of individual psychology and socialization ('psychogenesis') and developmental trajectories of political and economic regulation at the level of the state and society ('sociogenesis'). Arising out of this relational and processual 'way of seeing', Elias was later to elaborate an encompassing sociological perspective incorporating a distinctive sociology of knowledge ('involvement and detachment') and a theoretical point of departure which, using the grounding concepts of 'figuration' and 'habitus', bypassed the epistemological tensions between the sociologies of action and social structure.

During the 1920s and 1930s, a central question for German sociologists was the synthesis of insights from Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. The work of Erich Fromm and others associated with the Institute for

Social Research in Frankfurt was paradigmatic in this regard. As the principal assistant to Karl Mannheim in the Department of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt during this period, Elias's formative intellectual years were spent at the confluence of some of the richest streams of European sociological thought. By synthesizing aspects of Weber and Simmel, together with an understanding of the behaviourist psychology of Watson, Cannon's physiology, Freudian psychoanalytical theory, and the 'Gestalt theory' of Köhler and Wertheimer, and undertaking an equally historical, psychological and sociological study, Elias arguably succeeded where earlier authors had failed. *The Civilizing Process* shows how the superego, in Freud's sense, developed through time and in relation to specific emerging structures of social interdependence.

Probably the earliest American sociologist to use Elias was Erving Goffman in *Asylums* (1961). There, in a discussion of monasteries, he refers to Elias's examination of the historical development of sleeping patterns. But whereas Goffman's work is largely ahistorical and almost entirely micro-sociological in emphasis, Elias can be read as a historicization of key Goffmanian concepts *avant la lettre*. By showing how what is carried on behind the scenes is variable through space and time, Elias lays the basis for an historical and comparative understanding of the relationship between 'front' and 'back stage' as well as the corresponding psychical structures, and the figurational matrices to which these relate. Although Goffman read Elias in the original German long before he was translated into English, and seems to have derived key insights from his work, he never showed any interest in a developmental theory dealing with historical transformations in the 'presentation of self'. That the sociological mainstream has (rightly) celebrated the work of Goffman whilst often (wrongly) ignoring the insights of Elias, relates in part to 'hodiecentrism' or 'today-centred thinking' (Goudsblom 1977: 7). Human beings are equipped with an intellectual apparatus attuned, at a deep level, to permanence rather than to change. It requires an enormous effort of detachment from routine everyday occurrences to begin to perceive long-term processes of change. Elias's sociology is more demanding than many because it requires a degree of detachment from the behavioural assumptions and clusters of meaning attaching to everyday concepts, which over many decades and centuries have become an 'automated' aspect of our 'second nature'. From a sociological point of view, however, the rewards for such detachment are great.

Another reason for Elias's anomalous status within the sociological community was that his work did not fit easily into any of the dominant sociological traditions. He compounded this sense of intellectual dissociation by developing his ideas in a singular manner with scant reference to

the intellectual contributions of his contemporaries. Despite his broadly left-liberal outlook, Elias generally eschewed participation in politics. Such detachment in part related to his sociology of knowledge, but it also contrasts markedly with the emotive and self-conscious political affiliations which have often characterized the discipline. However, this detachment from the immediacy of political engagement, combined with this empirical and historical methodology and a direct and lucid writing style, has meant that Elias's work has dated remarkably little, still striking first-time readers with its explanatory power and originality.

What then are the defining features of the figurational approach? Following Goudsblom (1977: 6–8) Elias's legacy can be summarized in terms of a series of deceptively simple propositions.

- (i) Human beings are born into relationships of interdependency. The social figurations that they form with each other engender emergent dynamics, which cannot be reduced to individual actions or motivations. Such emergent dynamics fundamentally shape individual processes of growth and development, and the trajectory of individual lives.
- (ii) These figurations are in a state of constant flux and transformation, with interweaving processes of change occurring over different but interlocking time-frames.
- (iii) Long-term transformations of human social figurations have been, and continue to be, largely unplanned and unforeseen.
- (iv) The development of human knowledge (including sociological knowledge) takes place within such figurations and forms one aspect of their overall development: hence the inextricable link between Elias's theory of knowledge and the sociology of knowledge processes (see Kilminster and Quilley, both in this volume).

From these propositions are derived a number of characteristic injunctions to sociologists. Firstly, they should studiously avoid thinking either about single individuals, or about humanity and society, as static givens. The proper object of investigation for sociologists should always be interdependent groups of individuals and the long-term transformation of the figurations that they form with each other. Human figurations are in a constant state of flux, in tandem with shifting patterns of the personality and habitus of individuals. For Elias, the foundation for a *scientific* sociology rests upon the correction of what he called the *homo clausus* or 'closed person' view of humans (the perspective underlying all forms of methodological individualism) and replacing it with an orientation towards *homines aperti* or pluralities of 'open people'. The nature of any individual's psychology and 'way of seeing' emerges out of the figurational

matrices in which s/he is a participant. Recognition of this allows Elias to problematize and historicize traditional philosophical epistemologies that involve the implicit and usually unrecognized assumption that an adult Western male could serve as the basis for a supposedly universal theory of knowledge. This point of departure, in the dynamic configurations that people form with each other, allows Elias to sidestep the fruitless individual *versus* society or structure *versus* agency debates (e.g. Giddens 1984). And since the concept of figurations applies equally to interdependencies between small groups of individuals, and larger groups associated with cities, race and caste (see Dunning, this volume), classes (Loyal, this volume), nation-states (Kapteyn, this volume), and ultimately humanity as a whole, this conceptual architecture similarly side-steps the much debated dualism between macro and micro perspectives (see Dunning and Mennell 2003).

Secondly, echoing Spinoza and anticipating recent developments in neuroscience (see Damasio 2003; 1997), the *homines aperti* formulation, together with the concept of habitus, allows Elias to avoid the mind/body duality that has dogged philosophy and filtered into much sociological theorizing. In this regard, the theoretical achievement of *The Civilizing Process* can be seen in terms of a synthesis of insights from Freudian psychoanalysis with a historical sociology of long-term processes of development. Elias recognized that sequence or ‘phasing’ in such processes of development must correspond to long-term transformations in patterns of individual socialization and personality formation: in effect that ‘human nature’ has a history. In line with the parallels already suggested between the concepts of psychogenesis and *homines aperti*, and the interactionist understanding of the self advanced by Mead and Goffman, the concept of ‘second nature’ points always to the formation of historically located groups of ‘interdependent selves’ (see Scheff, this volume).

Thirdly, *vis-à-vis* this deep-seated blindness to long-term processes of change, Elias sensitizes the sociological imagination to problems of language and particularly the dominant conceptual vocabulary that reduces processes to states (*Zustandsreduktion*). As he pointed out, such a tendency is a characteristic of Western languages, which express constant movement or change by first positing an isolated object at rest, before adding a verb to express the fact that the thing with this character is now moving or changing. Thus, for instance, we say that ‘the wind is blowing’, as if a wind could exist somehow without blowing (1978: 111–12).⁴ By consistently using processual nouns (e.g. ‘courtization’, ‘sportization’) in his work, and eschewing formulations that imply that ‘social structures’ can exist outside of the ‘figurational flux’, Elias consistently drew

attention to the reifying potential of stock sociological concepts such as class (see Loyal, in this volume).

Fourthly, in line with his struggle against the tendency for sociology to separate objects from relationships, Elias was particularly concerned to develop a relational understanding of social forms. For example, in relation to the concept of power, most analyses have tended to reify it and treat it as a 'thing' which can be 'possessed', 'held' or 'seized' in an absolute sense. The implication of such constructions is either that one has power or that one is absolutely deprived and powerless. In contrast, Elias stressed the polymorphous and many-sided character of power as

[a] . . . structural characteristic . . . of all human relationships . . . We depend upon others; others depend on us. Insofar as we are more dependent on others than they are on us, they have power over us, whether we have become dependent on them by their use of naked force or by our need to be loved, our need for money, healing, status, a career or simply for excitement. (1978: 74, 93)

For Elias, as long as one party to a relationship has a function, and therefore a value, for another, he or she is not powerless, however great the discrepancy in the power ratio between them may be.

Finally, as an aspect of the more general long-term development of knowledge, sociology should be seen in terms of the continuing attempts by people to orient themselves within the social figurations that they form together. In any historical context there are differences in power between individuals within any figuration and different levels of insight about how the figuration works. But in line with the unplanned and unforeseen nature of long-term processes of development, the overall level of power, insight and control over the operations of figurations as a whole, remain generally low. Sociologists are people and, without their involvement in social life, they would be neither motivated nor able to explain social processes. However, whilst distancing himself from the Weberian understanding of value-neutrality, Elias insisted on the need for the social sciences to engender a *relatively* greater degree of detachment in order to grasp longer-term figurational dynamics and developments (Goudsblom 1977: 8; see Kilminster this volume). Without this they are more rather than less prone to images based upon fantasy thinking rather than careful investigation. In *Involvement and Detachment* Elias shows how humanity's increasingly reliable knowledge of non-human nature and our expanding techno-economic 'zone of safety' have, paradoxically, made human beings more vulnerable in relation to social processes. Nevertheless, Elias continued to maintain a critical acceptance of certain fundamental ideas characteristic of Enlightenment thinking. Just as has been the case *vis-à-vis* knowledge of non-human nature, Elias repeatedly affirmed his belief

that the expansion of the stock of reality-congruent sociological knowledge will, over time, provide individuals and groups with more effective means of orientation in relation to figurational transformations. In this sense, over the long term, sociology will eventually be able to underwrite more effective interventions at various levels including that of the state. But direct political commitments and involvements must be one step removed from the immediate process of sociological investigation. As happened in the natural sciences, sociology needs to create professional procedures and conventions and institutional checks and balances which, to a degree, insulate the knowledge process and allow researchers to develop a secondary involvement in the process of detached observation: a 'partisan' commitment to unravelling connections and searching for explanations in the webs of interdependence.

Elias's major works: an intellectual and historiographical route-map

The Civilizing Process is undoubtedly Elias's *magnum opus* and established Elias as an important if somewhat dissident figure in the sociological canon. His bifocal investigation of psychological and behavioural transformations among the upper and middle classes in Europe on the one hand, and processes of 'internal pacification' and state formation (including the build-up for wars) on the other, created a rich and complex account of long-term processes of social transformation which rivals the definitive accounts bequeathed by the Holy Trinity of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, themselves canonized by writers such as Anthony Giddens. Written during the turbulent interwar period and published on the eve of the Second World War, *The Civilizing Process* (1939) can also be seen as one of the last expressions of the earliest tradition of academic sociology established by writers such as Weber, Durkheim and Mannheim, in the wake of Auguste Comte.⁵

During this period, intellectuals were less conscious of their departmental affiliations and more instinctively interdisciplinary in approach. In particular, there was a healthy, and perhaps urgent, engagement between historical sociology and institutional economics. Written during a period when the nascent liberal-democratic version of industrial-market society was being squeezed by authoritarian and state-centred models of development in the form of both European fascism and Soviet communism, Elias's epic study of the Western civilizing process should be seen alongside the work of Joseph Schumpeter (1942) and Karl Polanyi (1944).

In the first chapter of *The Civilizing Process*, Elias investigates the developmental differences underlying the contrast between the German understanding of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* on the one hand and the concept of Civilization in France and England. His aim was to investigate the historical-sociological specificities underlying twentieth-century pathologies in German society and these arguments were later developed at greater length in his study *The Germans* (1996).

However, despite its evident importance, *The Civilizing Process* has often been read partially and incompletely. With surprising regularity, commentators from within the discipline have dwelt upon the first volume but ignored or played down everything in the second, where the corollary processes of state formation and pacification are discussed and where, in the long and brilliant 'Synopsis' (Elias, 2000: 363–447) he reveals the interwoven elements of the whole work. This neglect was undoubtedly partly a consequence of the chequered and separate publication of Volumes I and II in English, four years apart. Yet other factors came into play in the context of its reception. The suspicion with which many sociologists view psychoanalysis and psychology, combined with the more general tendency to compartmentalize domains of investigation, has led to the designation of *The Civilizing Process* as simply a 'history of manners', effectively consigning the book to relative obscurity. It has also meant that Elias's conceptual contribution is often presented as being limited to the recognition of a relationship between the development of modern society and the lowering of thresholds of shame and embarrassment – a kind of antiquarian adjunct to Goffman. As a result, the expansive synthetic vision of the book has disappeared from view.

Elias opens *The Civilizing Process* by asking how it was that certain classes in the developing nation-states of Western Europe came to think of themselves as 'civilized'. He goes on to examine how this understanding became generalized as a badge of the West's superiority *vis-à-vis* non-Western cultures. In the investigation of this question, he was led to chart long-term transformations in regimes of manners and behavioural codes, which he saw as involving the internalization of restraints. Elias's primary sources of evidence were the books of manners or etiquette manuals that were produced all over Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, mainly for the purpose of instructing adults of the upper (and later middle) classes. In particular, his work demonstrates how, in the sociogenesis of the absolutist states, a characteristic habitus involving increasing super-ego restraints over affective impulses and drives (significantly, but not exclusively, in relation to violent behaviour), became a compelling aspect of 'court society'. It was this pattern of upper-class manners and affective sensibility that subsequently, as a result of processes of distinction and

imitation, became generalized as a model for polite behaviour, gradually diffusing through wider strata of society. This narrative pertaining to the blind and unplanned – but nevertheless structured and directional – transformation of manners, is the primary subject of Volume I of *The Civilizing Process*. However, Elias was not concerned simply with presenting a ‘history of manners’. Volume I cannot be understood without reference to Volume II, which deals with questions of state formation and involves the outline of a theory of civilizing processes. Specifically, Elias shows how the process of the internalization of restraints and the resulting transformation in behavioural codes (*psychogenesis*) was intimately connected with transformations in the division of labour, demographic shifts, processes of societal pacification, urbanization, and the growth of trade and the money economy (*sociogenesis*). Briefly stated, the argument is that growth in the urban money economy facilitated, but also critically depended upon, the power and increasing monopoly on violence of the central state authority. A key aspect of this process was the formation of a rationalized administrative apparatus in the towns. The central state, with greater access to these economic circuits, gained access to greater military resources, relative, in the first instance, to the lower levels of the landed warlord nobility, whose principle source of economic and military power remained the control over finite and depreciating provincial land assets. Over time, this shifting power ratio resulted in the transformation of a formerly independent warrior class into an increasingly dependent upper class of courtiers. In this process there was a virtuous circle through which greater pacification facilitated trade and economic growth, and which in turn underwrote the economic and military power of the central authority. In these newly pacified social and economic domains, and particularly within the social dynamics of court society, these developments systematically rewarded more restrained patterns of behaviour. Over a long period of time external restraints associated with the outward authority relations of state formation were increasingly internalized as self-constraints resulting in a characteristic shift in the habitus and personality structure.⁶ In a word, the relationship between processes of psychogenesis and sociogenesis has been deep-seated and iterative.

At this point we should perhaps consider the question as to whether *The Civilizing Process* is to be understood as a universal theory, applicable to all human societies. Elias has often been accused of resurrecting a version of Victorian progress theory. On this point it should suffice to say that although there are obvious problematic normative associations with the term ‘civilization’, Elias is explicit in his insistence on a technical concept of ‘civilizing process’ which refers only to path-dependencies in the sequence or phases of social development – i.e. progression, or to