

Norbert Elias on his Ninetieth Birthday

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I

People aren't in a position to eliminate death; but they could quite certainly eliminate killing each other. (Elias, 1985: 90)

Someone who in his youth had to witness how a fellow pupil was tortured to death by right-wing radicals; who, as a soldier, suffered 'the martyrdom of exhausting trench warfare' until 1918; and who, after the following war, had to formulate the dedication of his republished masterwork to his mother as 'died Auschwitz 1941 (?)'; someone like this does not have to justify why, as a social scientist, he is centrally concerned with the question of how human aggressiveness can be tamed and how social patterns of moderation and self-control are evolved.

II

Norbert Elias was born 22 June 1897 in Breslau, the son of well-to-do parents. After the First World War he studied medicine, philosophy and psychology in Breslau and Freiburg, gained his PhD on 30 January 1924 from Richard Hoenigswald in Breslau, and studied sociology in Heidelberg. After spending some time in business and a short period as a writer, he aimed to gain his *Habilitation* from Alfred Weber in Heidelberg but, in 1930, he accompanied Karl Mannheim to Frankfurt. There he wrote a study on power, the 'royalty mechanism' of the French aristocracy, which was to form his *Habilitation* dissertation which was published unchanged in 1969 as *Die hoefische Gesellschaft*.

When he had to leave the institute of sociology as one of the last to go into exile in 1933, Elias had hoped to gain a post in Paris on the strength of his early familiarity with the French language and

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history — but this was in vain. Friends helped him to come to England, although he did not speak the language at that time. During this early phase he was supported by grants from Dutch and English foundations and also worked in the 'group therapy' founded by another exile, the Frankfurt analyst S.H. Fuchs (Foulkes). His main work, *The Civilizing Process*, was completed by September 1936. In 1940 he was moved, like all residents from countries with which Britain was at war, to the Alien Internment Camp at Huyton near Liverpool and from there to the Isle of Man. He then taught in adult education at the University of London. In 1954 he gained his first permanent position in the new Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester, which had developed out of a teacher training college. The founder and long-time Head of Department was Ilja Neustadt, who came from Odessa. For many years, this department was, together with one at the London School of Economics, the largest department of sociology in Britain. After his retirement in 1962, Elias taught in Ghana until 1964 when he was 'discovered' by Gerhard Grohs. He then returned to Leicester where he remained until the 1970s. In and around Ghana he gathered his significant collection of African wood sculptures which now surrounds him in his flat in Amsterdam.

In 1976 Elias became an Honorary Member of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Soziologie*. He was the first person to receive Frankfurt's Theodor W. Adorno Prize in 1979. In 1980, he was awarded an Honorary Degree by the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld. He was also honoured by the President of the Federal Republic, Richard von Weizsaecker, and by receptions such as the one given in 1986 by the Mayor of the Free City of Hamburg, Klaus von Dohnanyi.

Within German sociology, he is hardly an 'early starter' even though he made his mark, as the youngest participant, at the Sixth German Sociology Conference in Zurich in 1928. His main work was published in 1939 but almost his entire teaching and publishing career falls into the period after his sixty-fifth birthday. At the fifteenth German Sociology Conference in Heidelberg in 1964, on Max Weber, he very nearly did not get to present his paper on 'Group charisma and group shame'; it was Dieter Claessens who stopped him being taken off the programme.

From then on, he took up a steadily increasing number of visiting lectureships and fellowships at a number of German-speaking universities, among them Münster, Berlin, Konstanz, Aachen,

Bochum, Hannover, Mannheim, Wien, Graz, and particularly at the University of Frankfurt where, on the basis of a law compensating victims of the Third Reich, he was made a professor emeritus. From the early 1970s onwards he was a regular guest at the University of Amsterdam and the Catholic University of Nijmegen.

In January 1981, the Theory Group of the BSA held a conference on Elias at Balliol College, Oxford. In December 1981, the 'Research Group on Figurational Sociology' of the Dutch Anthropological and Sociological Association organized a conference on 'Theories of Civilization and Civilizing Processes' (Wilterdink, in Gleichmann et al., 1984).

From 1978 to 1984 Elias taught as a guest of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) at the University of Bielefeld. During this time he gave lectures at universities in Denmark and the USA. In July 1984, a dialogue took place with William H. McNeill, at that time the president of historians in the USA, and Immanuel Wallerstein in the course of a conference at the ZiF on 'Civilizations and Civilizing Processes. Comparative Perspectives' (Brinkgreve and van Stolk, 1984).

Elias received a late, but particularly thorough, reception in France. In 1977, the sociologist and photographer Gisele Freund noted that:

Elias is now a celebrated man in France. When his book, *The Civilizing Process*, was published in Paris last year it became a sensation and a bestseller. An infinite number of articles appeared in newspapers, weekly and monthly magazines. His ideas were discussed on radio and television. (Gleichmann et al., 1977a: 13)

In May 1980, a conference with Parisian historians took place at the Max-Planck-Institut for History in Goettingen, and the *Mission historique française en Allemagne* attached to it, through the mediation of R. von Thadden. Francois Furet on this occasion testily enquired about Elias's 'intellectual origins'. A further conference took place in March 1983 in the *VIe Section* of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. The medieval historian Jacques LeGoff gave his homage to Elias in fluent German. At the end of November 1985 Pierre Bourdieu invited Elias to give a lecture at the Collège de France.

In the 1980s, more and more lectures, talks and interviews appeared on radio and television, in newspapers and magazines, particularly in the Netherlands and Germany but also in Austria, Greece and Italy. At the twentieth German Sociology Conference in

Bremen in 1980 and at the twenty-first in Bamberg in 1982, Elias presented a number of papers. A report on the twenty-third conference in Hamburg in 1986 in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie* (Vol. 38/4, 1986: 830) refers to

the moving appearance of Elias that had both a formal and substantive fascination. At no other occasion was the auditorium as filled and as quiet as during the reflections, lasting one hour and delivered without notes by this aged scholar, concerning the directed, yet non-teleological process of technologization and civilization.

III

We can situate the development of his main work, *The Civilizing Process*, much better if we keep in mind that sentence from the Introduction to the first volume (p. lxxx) that was written in London in 1936 and published in Basel in 1939:

The problematic itself, however, stems less from the scientific tradition in the narrower sense than from experiences which influence us all, the experience of the crisis and transformation of Western civilization as we have known it. And then there is the simple need to understand what this 'civilization' is in fact about.

In other words, Elias's book belongs to that wide genre of spontaneous intellectual reactions to the violent National-Socialist German state that includes such analyses as Helmut Plessner's (1935) *Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes im Ausgang seiner bürgerlichen Epoche*, Franz Neuman's (1942) *Behemoth* and Alfred Vagts's (1937) *A History of Militarism*. We could add one or the other study on Machiavelli or Hobbes as more indirect reactions. A comparison of some similar, often excellent, analyses evidences some common strands but all merely add up, in the main, to some knowledge of the past, and have become just that. In contrast to many of these studies, Elias's main work is discussed in many countries today, fifty years after its publication, as if it had just been written. Indeed, many critics completely forget the fact that they are dealing with a work more than half a century old. Why is this? Elias's work is not focused on a fleeting 'today'; it is 'non-hodiecentric' (Goudsblom, 1974a) in approach. It is truly concerned with the process of civilization. The underlying *processual model* of the long-term transformations of human figurations is relatively independent of the vantage point of observers and the continuum of change of which they are a part.

IV

Elias's main work already contained the core of almost all his later themes: there are no 'preliminary studies' to it. Many of his later publications provide a comment on it or develop further some of the methods or ideas contained in it in an original way. This applies, for example, to the *insider-outsider* theme or methodological elaborations relating to *synthesis formation*. From the start, Elias worked on a relatively high level of synthesis drawing on the findings of disparate disciplines.

His integration of Freud's dynamic psychology into a sociological *process theory* possibly represents his most original achievement. This comes about neither normativistically nor nomothetically but in empirical-theoretical steps in which historical data are gathered and integrated into an existing theoretical framework. The result is more reality-adequate and encompasses more perspectives. Elias not only integrates scattered elements of contemporary historical knowledge but also brings together a wide spectrum of findings from other scientific disciplines in a way that can hardly be found anymore in sociological theory at this end of the twentieth century, which is largely shaped by the conceptions related to philosophical reductionism. We are here dealing with a 'repressed theoretical tradition'; a 'sociology in exile', as we now have to say.

Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Gleichmann et al., 1977b: 101) was one of the first who located Elias's intellectual framework within a sociology of knowledge. Another of the catalysing effects of Elias's sociology consists in placing synthesis formation as a necessary, equally valid, activity alongside the currently dominant epistemological tendency to concern oneself exclusively with analysis. It should be noted that multi-level analysis has been Elias's preferred analytical approach as far back as *The Civilizing Process*. His study *On Time* (Elias, 1984b), states in the first sentence that it is to be 'an examination of time, but not of time alone'. Here, Elias sketches the long-term process of humanity's synthesis formation as well as the specific one carried out by researchers. Through his own integrative efforts Elias provides, in fact, many individual disciplines with a widened frame of reference and offers them a new societal level of synthesis which enables them to conduct research in accordance with their own criteria in a way that is also more aware of historical and social factors.

V

The initial reception and critique of the body of Elias's work in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands can be surveyed fairly well thanks to Johan Goudsblom's (1974) detailed account. Its subsequent reception and effectiveness can hardly be followed any longer by individual researchers. The volume of translations into, for example, Danish, Polish, Italian, Portuguese and Japanese, is on the increase. There are now *followers*. In 1974 Elias remarked, in an interview with the *Nouvel Observateur* (Elias, 1974: 106): 'I am European . . . I have followers in the Netherlands, in Germany, in Great Britain'. Is there also something like a school? In Leicester he had Bryan Wilson, Anthony Giddens and Eric Dunning among his students. There is also original work coming out of Amsterdam, such as Anton Blok's (1974) study of the Mafia or his sketch of the long-term emergence of the cultural-anthropological approach. The 'Study-Group on Figurational Sociology' brought together pupils of Goudsblom. A range of influential studies, mostly in the form of dissertations, were produced: there is Nico Wilterdink's (1984) examination of property accumulation in Holland over a span of 130 years; or the study of the accumulation, over 450 years, of the cultural capital of a patrician family by Cees Schmidt (1986). In Hannover, Volker Krumrey (1984) gained his PhD for an analysis of the change in manners in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Michael Schroeter (1985) for an account of marriage procedure in the Middle Ages. All these monographs are empirical studies in the more complex sense of the word. They draw on new 'sources' or reinterpret familiar ones in an original way. They are essentially 'empirical-theoretical' analyses. A purely theoretical discourse, which is characteristic of German debates in particular, is absent. In other places one also finds a growing number of theoretically oriented elucidations (e.g. Bogner (1986) and Kuzmics (1987)).

In German-speaking countries, the critique of Elias differs in intensity and comes from different perspectives. In the first place, one can note an attitude of interested reservation. The distance from the body of work is often expressed in embarrassed silence; as, for example, when Elias first presented his 'Essay on Time' in front of historians at Bielefeld (at the ZiF on 30 May 1979). A similar reaction is apparent among those sociologists who follow Popperian postulates; those who develop Parsons's normativism; or those who carry out historical research on the basis of the normativistic postulates of authoritative philosophical views concerning the con-

struction of developmental theories. At a second level, there are now more and more direct critiques. Often they find fault with what the author did not cover, especially in his main work. It is noted that there is no treatment of the 'underclasses', or concern with developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What these researchers forget is that they are dealing with a book that is more than fifty years old. Elias tends to reply: 'why don't you contribute that aspect yourself?'. The way that similar criticism, i.e. that the author neglects 'the economy', is based on misunderstanding becomes apparent if one refers to the first sentence of the second volume: 'The struggles between the nobility, the Church and the princes for their shares in the control and the produce of the land, run through the entire Middle Ages'.

In turning sociological conceptualization towards 'concepts related more directly to people' Elias distances himself from currently dominant economic theories; especially when they have managed, in their models, to eliminate the problem of violence and its control which accompanies exchange activities.

More remarkable is a third group of criticisms such as that by the historian F.L. Carsten, who shows that the 'royalty mechanism' diagnosed by Elias in the centralizing tendencies of the French Court, is not apparent in Prussia. Such reservations can only be dealt with by a comparative analysis of the case concerned.

A fourth group of prominent critics, especially in Germany, denies the problem of civilization any relevance; it is seen merely as an expression of the 'civilizing needs' of earlier 'upper classes'. These objections take their most determined, if also most old-fashioned, form where a kind of 'cultural research' resurfaces and a kind of 'cultural sociology' is re-established that is solely concerned with 'what is' and no longer asks 'how it came to be?'. Elias answers that 'the universal civilizing process forms a part both of the conditions of the *individualization* of people and of their social co-existence'.

A fifth category of critics therefore appears the most promising as far as further development is concerned. There is a circle of researchers who are more distant from the author and who are examining Elias's theorems in quite different contexts: Bassam Tibi (1985) looks for comparisons with Islam; G. Juetteman (1986) attempts to introduce a 'historical' dimension into psychological research; H. Habers (1986) compares Elias's sociology of knowledge and of science with the one developed, in parallel, by Fleck. A number of authors are in the process of presenting 'Elias's

sociology', e.g. J. Goudsblom, H. Korte, S. Mennell. Elias himself regards his work as nothing more than 'a contribution to mainstream sociological theory'.

After a thorough consideration of the critical, largely social-anthropologically inclined, Dutch reception Ton Zwaan comes to the conclusion:

Anyone who wants to get further than Elias should not look up to, or down at, him but would do best to stand on his shoulders. That would also bring us nearer to the ideal of a more integrated, historically-oriented comparative social science and thereby provide us with a better understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. (Zwaan, 1983: 15)

A sample of a passionate *counter*-critique is provided by L. Brunt and others (Brunt, 1984; Brunt et al., 1983).

VI

For a great part of his life, Elias has provided the fascinating centre of a circle of younger colleagues and students. Yet, he never found himself in a leading position within the university. For him, those circles of often highly qualified male and female friends provided stimulation and an audience which led him to his greatest intellectual productivity. Is it possible to find anything comparable in German universities at the end of the twentieth century? Can this intersection of such social circles be replaced by the conference circuit?

The Heidelberg circle performed a short play on the occasion of the departure of Mannheim and Elias to Frankfurt in 1930: the script was written by Elias, following Aristophanes. One member of this circle, Richard Loewenthal, is still able to quote from it fifty-seven years later. In his speech at the occasion of receiving the Adorno Prize in 1977, Elias refers to Frankfurt where

. . . the university formed one of the centres of a wide-ranging circle of social intercourse that included part of Frankfurt society . . . [it] drew towards it a circle of men whose name and work are still respected today, men such as Wertheimer, the *Gestalt* psychologist, Goldstein, the neurologist, the theologian and philosopher Tillich, Adolf Lowe, the political economist, Erich Fromm, Marcuse, Mannheim, Horkheimer and Adorno, to name just a few. Not all the circles were in close contact with each other. (Elias, 1977b: 38)

We should also include members within the orbit of the new Psychoanalytic Institute, such as S.H. Fuchs or Julia Mannheim.

The Amsterdam circle was described quite frequently at the beginning of the 1980s, mostly within the context of conferences (Brinkgreve and Bruin, 1980) and sometimes from a considerable social distance (Brunt, 1984).

VII

Elias stands in a particular figuration of tension in relation to other academic disciplines. If one leaves aside the question of the scientific 'influences' on him (he rejects most of the 'findings' in this respect) we are left with the fact of his real involvement in other disciplines and, above all, his later influence upon them. The latter is enhanced by the high comprehensibility of his language. His writings are, in fact, of high literary quality. They avoid professional jargon which, in contrast to current, largely professionalized, stylistic habits, increases their chance of exerting some influence in other fields.

He feels close to many psychologists, in particular Sigmund Freud. He speaks highly of William Stern and of Wilhelm Reich whose early work he absorbed. His proximity to Gestalt psychology is evident.

S.H. Fuchs, the psychiatrist, stated in 1941 in a review of the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* concerning Elias's conception of psychology that 'This is the introduction of a holistic view into sociology' (Fuchs, 1941: 316). And in 1967, Fuchs/Foulkes, himself a student of Kurt Goldstein, remarks in his autobiographical reminiscences of Frankfurt:

Personally, I owe to this and later on to my contact with Franz Borkenau and Norbert Elias and to their work a great debt of gratitude, for the insight that biological and sociocultural factors are equally fundamental to a true understanding of the human mind. (Foulkes, 1967: 121)

Now some effect is beginning to take place on psychologists who were taught their discipline as a natural science (Juettemann, 1986). Elias is strongly influenced by the physiological ethology that emerged within medicine in the 1920s. He says of his early years in Leicester that he regularly brought to his classes in introductory sociology models of the brain, facial muscles and throat, in order to demonstrate more clearly the specific communicative faculties of humans.

It is in his relationship with philosophers that both long-term engagement and tense distancing are probably most marked. On

21 February 1977 Elias wrote to G. Wolandt, the editor of the works of his teacher Hoenigswald:

It was, of course, a particular pleasure to remember Hoenigswald. I frequently have a look at your special edition of *Grundprobleme der grossen Philosophen*. After more than fifty years — I lost contact with him as far back as the '20s, probably because he was far too authoritarian for my taste — I can look back with interest. What attracted me to him in particular was not only the precision of his mind and his originality but also his uncompromising and impatient rejection of metaphysics, old and new. For as long as I knew him, he never submitted to the *Zeitgeist*, whether it appeared as ontology, existentialist philosophy, phenomenology, etc. In this respect there existed a great affinity between us; not until this day have I been able to compromise with the *Zeitgeist*. Even if I got on very well on a personal level with somebody like Jaspers . . . I never kept my doubts about his existentialist philosophy to myself, not even for a moment. Since then, possibly fortified by Hoenigswald's stance, I have remained immune against all fashionable trends, whether they involved Sartre, Wittgenstein, Popper or Parsons and Lévi-Strauss. Now I get the feeling that I have, maybe somewhat belatedly, battled through. (Gleichmann et al., 1977a: 132)

He distances himself most decisively from those philosophers who want to prescribe a unitary methodology for all the sciences. To them he opposes a sociological theory of science that starts with the question of the specific nature of the individual sciences and how they, in fact, progress.

His effect on sociologists is also marked by a tense ambivalence. There is strong endorsement from many representatives of specialist branches, such as the sociology of education or research into sexual behaviour. Starting with sections in his main work, Elias devotes chapters to 'children' and 'changes in the relationship between men and women'. The resonance he finds among sociologists of sport derives from the problem of the control of aggression, but also from personal experiences (he lost the sight of one eye in a skiing accident; as an amateur boxer he ended up with a broken nose). A productive dialogue emerged with the sociology of science. But here the 'scientific establishment' is inclined to reject categorically a sociology of science that is oriented towards the question of power and the sociology of knowledge.

A still unexpressed but growing distancing is occurring among sociological theorists whose theories are based on philosophical constructions, on 'mere excogitation' as Elias remarks. There is also some misunderstanding on the part of 'methodological individualists': Elias does not start with 'the individual'. He has instead fused sociology with a differentiated psychology. He does not establish a

'nomological science'. There are also uncertainties in relation to Weberians; Elias has overcome the 'misleading' opposition, as he says, of 'individual' and 'society'. He is always concerned with the 'largest units of survival', the 'whole' and, with the help of multi-level analyses, at the same time with 'the relationship of people to themselves'. Is his work not really a study of the 'rationalization of the world?', he was once asked at a Max Weber conference. 'Did Max Weber have a *process* theory?', Elias replied coolly.

His reception among Marxists is more differentiated. Those who look for the exhortative appeal of Marxian concepts come away disappointed. Anyone who, like Elias, has lived for any length of time within a Marxian environment — all debates at the Institute in Frankfurt at about 1930 revolved around the question of what is true Marxism, as W. Strzelewicz (1986: 150) has noted — knows how to avoid the pathos and insistence of these concepts. But one also learns how to integrate all of Marx's insights which are relevant to the social sciences into theorizing. For example, to start with a survey of the field, the totality, including therefore non-human 'nature'; the importance of long-term perspectives, and the constant awareness of centres of power and of monopolies of all kinds, especially those of violence and knowledge. Elias has diagnosed at an early stage the renewed turn to Marxism among the younger generation in the 1960s and saw it as a prophylactic: 'it helped young people to rid themselves in their own eyes and in those of the whole world of the stigma of the gas chambers that stained the German name', as he stated later in his Adorno Prize speech (1977b: 61). Those who have been able to free themselves from unredeemable promises were more able to avoid disappointment and to find in Elias's work an open framework for the continued work towards a higher level of synthesis; it does not try to do any more than encourage the conduct of further research both 'empirically' and 'theoretically'.

His relationship with historians is also ambivalent. On the one hand, there is more historical research drawing on Elias' work in matters of detail, but less so in a systematic form. As far as the majority of historians in the Federal Republic are concerned, Elias's views on the interrelation of 'Sociology and History' stated in his *Court Society* in 1969 still applies; despite the 'Paris School' and '*Historische Sozialwissenschaft*' or the work of some historians in the GDR and Anglo-American 'historical sociology'. In the context of current debates within history and sociology Elias occupies an

intermediate position, one which he, in his eighty-sixth year, reformulated more precisely in his essay 'On Time' (Elias, 1984b: 174). The 'aim and purpose' of his study he sees as a 'transitional step from an earlier to a more recent level of synthesis', as the 'replacement of a static "systematic" or short-term "historical" perspective by a developmental and sociological one, one which is equally removed from both philosophical absolutism and historical relativism'. The historian's claim to scientific status, which rests on the careful examination of detailed evidence he regards as an advance on more speculative periods.

Whereas, however, the attention historians give to detail is subject to a rigorous professional control, their task to fit together the mass of detailed fragments into a coherent picture is far less controlled. The synthesis achieved by historians largely takes the form of narrative description in which ascertained facts are bound together in an imaginative way that is far less secure. The scope for the intrusion of personal beliefs and ideals into this narrative is vast. It is normal practice among historians to apply all kinds of possible criteria which are used to judge contemporaries to groups and individuals in the past. (Elias, 1984b: 174)

So far, there is little evidence of any influence in the natural sciences, even though Elias concerns himself with various natural sciences at numerous occasions. In *The Civilizing Process* he deals in detail with Darwinian evolutionary thinking, without drawing any false analogies with sociology and without giving credence to the Social Darwinism dominant in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century by a single mention. He analyses in detail the established pattern of thinking among physicists, and he returns to the evolutionary concepts held by astronomers and biologists in his *Involvement and Detachment* (Elias, 1983).

It is worth mentioning that there are very few remarks by Elias with regard to law and jurisprudence in view of his *universalistic* mode of thinking.

Elias's relationship to literature is active and not merely receptive; something which writers noted early on. He has remained in close contact with some authors ever since he went into exile. Historians of literature, such as Peter Boerner, came to appreciate his writing at an early stage. But what about publishers? How does a renowned scientist get his poems published, and how does he convince sceptical friends? Elias managed to invite people to a university bookshop in Frankfurt on the occasion of his eighty-second birthday. S. Unseld, the publisher, was among them. Elias's reading of

his poetry was accomplished. Soon his poems began to appear here and there, but it took another eight years before the bulk of his poems were published. Here, too, his central theme is present with a section entitled 'Dances of Death'. Elias's own poems and his rendering of English and French poems will stand with the best written in the German language. It is easier to understand why a, by now, world-famous social scientist strives so tenaciously to get his poems published if we recognize them, too, as an integral part of the statement of Norbert Elias, the man, about himself.

VIII

The way Elias sees himself can be gathered from his own work, his perception of others, and from numerous published discussions. In a number of respects Elias sees himself as an outsider or, more precisely, as an established outsider. The whole ambivalence of *The Established and the Outsiders* has been thoroughly analysed — in contrast with a declamatory and self-pitying outsider cult — and turned into a sociological theorem with a claim to general validity. In his 'Theoretical Essay on the Established and the Outsider' (1976) that appeared in Dutch as the Foreword to his book, first published in English in 1965, he deals with those cases in which economic differences can no longer account for all remaining differences. Elias regards this as a development of Marx's theory of class. The superior group derives its power predominantly from a kind of group charisma. It consequently combats the subordinate group largely through collective stigmatization. The Foreword cites a range of examples, but not that of the Jews. He discusses the position of Jews in his home town of Breslau in this context in some detail ten years later in his 'Notes on my Life': 'they were treated as second-class citizens but, as I said, did not feel themselves to be second-class people' (Gleichmann et al., 1984: 55).

Concerning his teachers he said, in reference to Alfred Weber that 'to accuse him of being intellectualist was the height of irony. Alfred Weber was polite and civilized, but he was also, as I said, passionate. He found it difficult to hide his anger' (Gleichmann et al., 1984: 44). About Karl Mannheim he (Gleichmann et al., 1984: 32) stated that in 1924 'at the height of his creative power, he was driven by the clear goal of a Chair in sociology'; and this goal could hardly be realized 'without the active assistance of an influential party organization'. 'It is possible that Mannheim might have achieved more had he been less concerned with his career'. Compared with Morris Ginsburg in

London, ‘Mannheim considered himself without doubt to be the better sociologist’. About Talcott Parsons, Elias made the following remark in his presence in the course of a round-table conversation during the ISA World Congress in Varna:

My critical attitude towards Parsons’ intellectual system is qualified by my respect for his person. One may disagree with him, but one cannot doubt his intellectual sincerity and integrity; nor the width of his power of synthesis which is one of the qualifying gifts of the distinguished theoretician. However, I cannot persuade myself that this gift has been used for the right cause. (Elias, 1970c: 277)

On Adorno:

What possibly links my orientation most closely with Adorno’s is his critical humanism. He may have understood something different by ‘humanism’ from what I do as he didn’t like the word. In the sense that I use this concept it does, however, apply to him, too. The theme that comes to the fore when I use this concept concerns, firstly, someone who sides emotionally with the powerless, the suppressed, the outsiders and the exploited and, secondly, someone who firmly and consequentially relates those dehumanizing concepts we tend to use when we write or talk about societal conditions, concepts such as economy, politics, culture, base, system, interaction, and hundreds more, to real people who together form a society. On the first point, Adorno and I travel together a part of the way; but then he goes no further and I have to continue the journey on my own. (Elias, 1977b: 44)

Even more remarkable are Elias’ comments on artists. He concludes a speech to the conference on European Court Society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Wolfenbuettel on 4 September 1979 with a poem by his favourite Baroque poet C. Hofmann von Hoffmannswaldau, reciting the final line: ‘He looks at the world/and he says “Yes”’. In a speech on 15 November 1979 to the Bielefelder Kunstverein entitled ‘Changes in art and in the position of the artist’ he comments on Picasso:

It was said, quite rightly, that Picasso sometimes went to exhibitions of younger colleagues and when he came across a novel idea he went home and carried it out in a superior way. He was playful, and he tried everything. This is what makes him so great. He was able to bring it off.

In a talk he gave, without notes, on the Third Programme of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk on 6 March 1983 with the title ‘An attempt to understand Mozart better’ he emphasized four points. Firstly, he argues against Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s biography of Mozart:

As an artist he is great, but it seemed to Hildesheimer that Mozart 'the man' is not equal to his artistic creation. I always felt uncomfortable with the separation of man and artist, man and genius. This was the problem that drew me closer to Mozart and that motivated me to get to know him better: Mozart 'the man' and how this relates to him as the artist.

Secondly: 'The wunder-kind . . . was taken from Court to Court and was brilliantly successful. We can imagine what that meant for a child . . . But something was missing'. Thirdly:

Perhaps I should draw your attention to one point that has been occupying me: Mozart tried to find a position for the whole of his life. . . . We can guess why the most gifted composer of his time was unable to really find a position: he was too uncomfortable for the people around him. It made them uneasy to have such a gifted person near them. In addition, he was proud . . . he was thus a thoroughly uncomfortable man. . . . But he could not pretend; he was hardly a good play-actor. So, this was one of the problems that interested me: how is it possible that such a man could not find employment? Here you have a possible answer. It was one of the great frustrations in his life.

Fourthly and finally: 'The other great frustration in his life . . . he always suffered a lack of money . . . and he was searching for love. Mozart in a way longed all his life to be loved.'

Among the innumerable interviews with Elias that have been appearing in different countries, and which range from the most general topics such as atomic warfare through apparently trivial questions about night-dress to very personal problems, it is the approach of younger Dutch social scientists which compared with the German approach, stands out on account of their direct line of questioning. In a talk, published in Dutch in 1984, we find towards the end some characteristic questions by Aafke Steenhuis:

At the end of our talk I asked Norbert Elias whether he has written an autobiography. 'No, only a few notes.' — Little is known of you, I remark, I don't even know, for example, whether or not you have been married. — 'No.' — Never? — 'No. Never.' — Why not? — 'Well, women were always jealous of my work. It was not possible.' — You loved your work more than you loved women, then? — 'Well, I don't know; I didn't want to be disturbed. My work was my life.' — Who imposed that? — 'I did, myself.' — Why did you do it? — 'It may sound a bit puritanical and pretentious, but I was exceptionally gifted and had the duty to make the best of it; it was my duty towards other people. This is still my outlook today. Soon my assistant will arrive, I still work as hard as ever; if I don't, I'll lose it. Sadly, women did not want that.' — And could you not find an intellectual woman who had her own work? — 'Well, yes; as a girlfriend, but not as someone to live with.' (Steenhuis, 1984)

Conclusion

One can characterize Elias's life and work as: an obsession with work that is open to the world and cheerfully ascetic; controlled passion together with a persistent and uncompromising striving for intellectual independence, as well as an unbending pursuit of original thought. On account of his remarkable ability to concentrate at any time on his own concerns or those of others, and to control himself more than most people, this places him in a position to generate a cohering body of knowledge that surpasses that of most social scientists in its sharpness of focus and breadth. With increasing age, the unshakable belief in his approach has continued to strengthen his self-determination. Many of his statements retain epigrammatic conciseness, across the frontiers of human knowledge. In his *The Loneliness of Dying* (Elias, 1982b: 84) he states that 'the attempt to find a meaning in one's life independently of the meaning this life has for other people is futile'. And then he brings up his central theme again:

Among the problems of our time which would deserve more attention is, accordingly, the one concerning the psychic transformation that occurs in people who find themselves moving from a situation in which killing is condemned absolutely and punished most severely to one in which it is socially not only allowed but even demanded, be it by the state or the party or a group. In wars, most people appear to lose their sensibility in relation to the killing of others, the dying and the dead, relatively rapidly. It would be worthwhile to examine in some detail the question of how the people in charge of concentration camps managed to cope with daily mass murder. That question often recedes behind a concern with the issue of guilt regarding such events. But it is the first, the empirical question, which is of special significance for social practice, in particular with a view to preventing such things happening again. (Elias, 1982b: 79)

Note

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